

# Knowledge Transmission and the Internalism-Externalism Debate about Content

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**Abstract** Sanford Goldberg (2015) argues for Content Externalism by drawing our attention to the extent to which an individual’s concepts depend on the concepts of others. More specifically, he focuses on cases that involve knowledge transmission between experts and non-experts to make his point. In this paper, I argue that the content internalist cannot only plausibly respond to his argument but that Content Internalism offers a more plausible account of intentional content with regard to knowledge transmission than does Content Externalism.

**Keywords** Knowledge transmission · Testimony · Concepts · Internalism · Externalism

In “Anti-individualism, comprehension and self-knowledge,” and under the influence of the work of Tyler Burge, Sanford Goldberg argues for what he calls a ‘minimalist’ view of the knowledge each person has of his or her own mind, which in turn is an argument for the type of Content Externalism that Burge and many others have championed for some time.<sup>1,2</sup> Goldberg argues that some basic

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<sup>1</sup>The view is considered minimalist because subjects count as having a concept even if they are not in a position to explicate the concept, to give, that is, an explanation of the application conditions of the concept.

<sup>2</sup>The locus classicus of Content Externalism is Burge (1979).

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facts about the phenomenon of knowledge transmission between experts and non-experts motivate a dilemma for Content Internalism.<sup>3,4,5</sup> In this paper, I argue that the dilemma is overstated and a specific version of Content Internalism can embrace one of the horns of the dilemma with no negative consequences. Furthermore, I argue that regarding knowledge transmission between experts and non-experts, the specific version of Content Internalism I defend is more plausible than Content Externalism. Goldberg calls this specific version of Content Internalism the Hybrid View, because it combines internalism about intentional content with externalism about linguistic meaning. To be clear, intentional content is the content of mental states, and should be contrasted with semantic content or linguistic meaning, which is the content of linguistic expressions.

In section 1, I sketch the type of knowledge transmission that motivates Goldberg's dilemma argument, and lay out the four assumptions he says are plausible and should not be rejected. In section 2, I explain the dilemma as Goldberg sees it. In section 3, I explain how the Hybrid View, a form of Content Internalism, can respond to this dilemma. I also explain why the Hybrid View is more plausible than Content Externalism with regard to knowledge transmission. In section 4, I address a worry for the Hybrid View and end with a brief conclusion.

## 1 The Four Assumptions about Knowledge Transmission

Here is one of the cases of knowledge transmission between expert and non-expert Goldberg offers.

NEOPHYTE STUDENT Henry is taking his first physics class, and so knows very little about electrons and is completely ignorant of the present state of theory regarding electrons. When Professor Ginsberg asserts, "Electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons," he accepts her say-so, and comes to express his belief using the very same form of

<sup>3</sup> Content Externalism and Content Internalism disagree on whether intentional content depends entirely on the intrinsic properties of thinkers. The internalist says that it does while the externalist says it does not. These forms of externalism and internalism should not be confused with externalism and internalism about semantic content, the content of linguistic items. If one collapses these distinct theses, then the view I argue for in this paper will seem to be incoherent. The Hybrid View I defend combines internalism about intentional content with externalism about semantic content.

<sup>4</sup> Goldberg (2007) makes a similar argument. I follow the streamlined version in (Goldberg 2015) in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Goldberg (2009) makes a similar argument to the one discussed in this paper. This argument functions as a reductio of the following apparently internalist principle: "In order to understand a speech act, one must completely grasp each of the concepts that compose the content of the speech act" (585). The problem with this assumption according to Goldberg is that it cannot be squared with two other plausible assumptions in a way that preserves the fact that testimonial knowledge is reliable. The two other plausible assumptions are: we speak public languages *and* these public languages express concepts of which speakers have incomplete grasps. Since testimonial knowledge is transmitted by way of public languages, then the three assumptions above entail that subjects do not really understand the concepts that compose the content of what is transmitted in testimony. This is a serious problem, of course, and to solve it Goldberg suggests we reject the internalist assumption about complete grasp. I do not address this argument here, but it is worth noting that consideration of the Hybrid View could diffuse the reductio in (Goldberg 2009) in the same way that I argue it diffuses his argument in (Goldberg 2015).

words. Verdict: Henry has come to know (through her say-so) that electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons, where the content of his knowledge is *that electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons*.

Goldberg says that knowledge is communicated in such cases, and that much seems undeniable. Reflecting on cases such as these reinforces four plausible assumptions that Goldberg lays out. They are as follows.

(Content Preservation or CP) In many central cases in which one acquires knowledge through accepting what another tells one, what one comes to know is the very knowledge expressed in the telling itself.

(Nature of our Understanding of others' speech acts or NU) For the central cases in which CP holds, what the hearer comes to know—the content of her knowledge—is what she understood the speaker to have asserted in the telling.

(Doxastic Diversity of Knowledge Communities or DDKC) There is a great diversity of belief among members of a single linguistic community.

(Comprehension in Doxastic Diversity or CDD) Even substantial doxastic diversity between speaker and hearer does not prevent the hearer's comprehension of the speaker's telling.

The assumptions seem to account for some basic facts of knowledge transmission between experts and non-experts. Surely there is great doxastic diversity in linguistic communities; the belief sets of members of linguistic communities vary widely. Even so, knowledge can be transmitted between such individuals, and such transmission happens by way of subjects grasping the content of what is told to them.

## 2 The Dilemma for Content Internalism

It seems undeniable that the neophyte student has an incomplete grasp of the intersubjective concept ELECTRON. If this concept is part of the proposition he knows when he knows *that electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons*, then he has a partial grasp of a concept that structures his own thought. This is related to the Burgean idea that a subject can possess a concept and yet not be in a position to fully explicate that concept.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the student's intentional content is structured by an intersubjective concept that he only partially understands—a rather common occurrence if Content Externalism is

<sup>6</sup> The idea here is that subjects can possess concepts without being in a position to spell out or explain the application conditions of those concepts.

true. At a minimum, an intersubjective concept is a concept that can be shared across individuals. The content externalist idea is that intersubjective concepts can be shared by subjects even when subjects have distinct beliefs about what the concepts concern. Sarah Sawyer ([forthcoming](#)) sums this up well.

Content externalism is committed to a distinction between concepts and conceptions. Concepts are mental representations that are components of thought, and a conception is the collection of beliefs associated with a concept. So my concept of penguins is the mental representation PENGUIN, and my conception of penguins is of flightless birds who are mostly black and white, that can identify their mate by sound, that come in different varieties, and so on. The traditional arguments offered by Putnam and Burge show that a thinker can possess a concept even though her associated conception is vague or inaccurate.

It is easy to see that cases of incomplete grasp, cases where conceptions and concepts diverge, are rife; there are many idiosyncratic variation of a concept across subjects in terms of subjects' conceptions.<sup>7</sup>

One worry about the externalist understanding of concepts and conceptions as laid out above is that intersubjective concepts often fail to properly capture a subject's perspective on the world, as Burgean cases clearly bring out.<sup>8</sup> This fact motivates one version of Content Internalism; the internalist could argue that it is personal conceptions and not intersubjective concepts that constitute an individual's thought content, and leave intersubjective concepts out of the picture entirely. There are two other options according to Goldberg. An internalist can reject the idea of a public language, thereby apparently rejecting the idea of public or intersubjective concepts. There is also the Hybrid View that does not leave intersubjective concepts out of the picture, but combines internalist and externalist doctrines. It accepts that the speech acts of individuals express intersubjective concepts, but denies that these concepts are always the concepts that constitute the content of individual thoughts. In other words, it adopts Semantic Externalism but rejects Content Externalism. None of these paths of resistance, however, are plausible according to Goldberg because they all face the following dilemma.

1. Either a content internalist must reject that public language concepts figure into semantic and intentional content or reject that the semantic content of ascriptions of thoughts is the same as the intentional content of those thoughts.
2. If a content internalist must reject that public language concepts figure into semantic and intentional content, then the content internalist cannot explain how knowledge of the same proposition is passed from expert to non-expert.
3. If the content internalist rejects that the semantic content of ascriptions of thoughts is the same as the intentional content of those thoughts, then there will be problems in making sense of the extent to which our thoughts depend on others.

<sup>7</sup> I should note that my use of 'concept' in this paper is not in complete harmony with Sawyer's. According to my terminology, concepts are abstract whereas she seems to understand them as concrete mental representations.

<sup>8</sup> See (Wikforss 2008) for more on this idea. She argues that the main problem for Content Externalism is that it fails to attribute to subjects concepts that they understand and therefore fails to capture properly their perspectives on the world.

4. Either the content internalist cannot explain how knowledge of the same proposition is passed from expert to non-expert or the content internalist cannot make sense of the extent to which our thoughts depend on others.

The basic idea behind this argument is that the proposition that the expert teaches is the very same proposition that comes to be known by the non-expert. So, the relevant thoughts of the expert and non-expert are structured by the very same concepts. In the case of the non-expert, these are concepts that cannot be fully explicated—though the expert seems to be in position to do so. None of the three internalist options, Goldberg says, can account for the phenomenon of knowledge transmission from expert to non-expert because they all reject the idea that the expert and non-expert possess the same concepts and thereby know the very same proposition.

### 3 The Proper Individualist Response

Of the internalist options, the Hybrid View is the most promising. This view says that public or intersubjective concepts (or Fregean senses if you like) determine linguistic meaning. This is clearly a form of externalism about meaning; it is Semantic Externalism and not Content Externalism because it concerns only linguistic meaning and not intentional content. This externalism about linguistic meaning and public concepts can be combined with Content Internalism about intentional content, which holds that the content of thoughts is determined by personal or subjective conceptions of thinkers.<sup>9</sup> Goldberg thinks that this bifurcation of content, into semantic and intentional content, cannot properly account for the degree to which our thoughts depend on others. I think this is mistaken, and therefore think that premise 3 in the dilemma argument is false. To show this, I will discuss the Hybrid View's analysis of NEOPHYTE STUDENT and show that it has no difficulties in making sense of the phenomenon of knowledge transmission between expert and non-expert. Furthermore, I argue that it is superior to the content externalist analysis.

On the Hybrid View, when the professor asserts, "Electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons," her assertion has semantic content that is structured by the intersubjective concepts that the terms of the sentence express. One could think of the intersubjective concepts here as the linguistic meanings of the terms. On the Hybrid View, there is no guarantee that the public language or intersubjective concept associated with 'electron' or 'nucleon' will structure either the expert or the non-expert's thoughts. They will each have personal conceptions that they associate with 'electron'.<sup>10</sup> Though we would need more information about the professor's other beliefs about electrons, it is safe to assume, given the knowledge of electrons that is required to be a physics professor, that the professor's conception ELECTRON more or less matches up with the public concept ELECTRON. In the case of the student, there is obviously not a

<sup>9</sup> I follow an established convention of using 'conceptions' to refer to personal concepts. See (Burge 1993) and (Carey 2009) for examples. It is worth noting, also, that to match up to the standard definition of Content Internalism one would have to hold that personal conceptions supervene on just the intrinsic properties of thinkers.

<sup>10</sup> Sawyer gives us a nice way to think about personal conceptions. As was noted earlier, such conceptions are constituted by the set of beliefs that a subject has about the referent of the concept.

perfect matching. His conception ELECTRON will be much more impoverished than the professor's. It will not be available for as many inferences in the mental economy of the student as it is in the mental economy of the professor, and the student's conception clearly contains much less information than the professor's conception ELECTRON.

The externalist may be ready to jump in and say that this is a coherent reading of the case, but not one in which the student and professor know the same proposition since their beliefs are structured by their own respective *personal* conceptions ELECTRON and not the public concept ELECTRON. However, I think this reaction is too quick and overlooks an option for the Hybrid View. There is a way to capture the idea that both beliefs are related to the same proposition. This way involves recognizing that the Hybrid View can be supported by a view about concepts that Margolis and Laurence (2007) dub the 'Mixed View' of concepts in their discussion of the ontology of concepts.<sup>11</sup> The Mixed View holds that concepts exist as both abstracta and as mental particulars. Defenders of the Hybrid View ought to accept the Mixed View of Concepts, because doing so opens up a move for the Hybrid View. The intersubjective concept ELECTRON is an abstract object and the professor's conception ELECTRON and the student's conception ELECTRON are mental particulars. Likewise, the proposition expressed by "electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons" is an abstract object while the intentional content of the respective beliefs of the student and professor are mental particulars. So, the concrete particulars differ in terms of their content, but they are similar enough to be typed as instances of the same proposition—just as the respective conceptions ELECTRON in the minds of the individual thinkers are similar enough to be typed by the same intersubjective concept ELECTRON. So, there is not a perfect matching of personal conceptions between expert and non-expert (or of particular intentional content of the respective beliefs), but this is how things should be given the differences that each particular conception ELECTRON plays in the respective mental economies of the thinkers. We can still say, though, that the intentional content of the beliefs are typed by the same abstract proposition since they are sufficiently similar.<sup>12</sup> So, there is a very real sense in which they are related to the very same proposition by having particular contents in their heads that are typed by the selfsame proposition.<sup>13</sup>

Having combined the Hybrid View with the Mixed View of Concepts we can see that the Hybrid View can not only accommodate Goldberg's four assumptions, but that it is a more plausible view than Content Externalism in light of how it handles the four assumptions taken together. It is important to understand that I am not arguing that the Hybrid View is superior on each individual count. It may be that Content Externalism

<sup>11</sup> This option is not properly considered in either (Goldberg 2015) or (Goldberg 2007).

<sup>12</sup> There are options open here about what makes it the case that two conceptions are typed by the same concept and also what makes it the case that the intentional content of two particular beliefs are typed by the same abstract proposition. One could say for example that two conceptions are typed by the same abstract concept just in case they meet the same list of necessary and sufficient conditions, and extrapolate this for intentional content and propositions since these will be composed of personal conceptions and intersubjective concepts respectively. One could go with something looser and more Wittgensteinian and say that two personal conceptions fall under the same intersubjective concept just in case they bear a family resemblance to each other. I favor the family resemblance view, but someone who endorses the Hybrid View seems free to choose either option here.

<sup>13</sup> Sutton (2004) explores a similar idea, where abstracta are thought of as types and mental particulars are thought of as tokens that fall under these types.

has a more plausible analysis relative to one of these assumptions (CP for example).<sup>14</sup> My point is something weaker: the Hybrid View is the account that does the best job of satisfying all four assumptions when they are considered together. Let us consider CP first.

(Content Preservation or CP) In many central cases in which one acquires knowledge through accepting what another tells one, what one comes to know is the very knowledge expressed in the telling itself.

According to the Hybrid View, knowledge of a proposition is transmitted in cases like the electron one, but the explanation for this is not as simple as the content externalist explanation. According to the content externalist, it is the very same proposition that is known by each individual; each individual's mind grasps the same abstract proposition. On the Hybrid View, each individual mind has particular intentional contents that are typed by abstract propositions. As long as the intentional contents are typed by the same proposition, then that is enough to capture the truth of CP. On the Hybrid View, the beliefs may differ in the electron case in terms of detail, but they are similar enough to count as being typed by the abstract proposition that electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons.

While the externalist account is definitely more direct and perhaps “cleaner” here in terms of its explanation, we can see some virtues of the Hybrid View on this point. After all, there is a very real sense in which the respective thinking about electrons is different, and it seems obvious that the professor's conception ELECTRON is distinct from the student's conception ELECTRON. There is a sense, of course, in which they are similar, too. The Hybrid View allows us to capture both of these senses. The Hybrid View says that the particular conceptions fall under the same abstract concept, which captures how they are at the same time distinct and similar. There are two distinct mental particulars. Even though the professor's conception is much richer, they are similar enough to fall under the same abstract concept. Goldberg, Burge, Sawyer and other externalists say that they possess the very same concept—though one of them grasps it incompletely. It must be admitted that this is another way to capture the idea that the conceptions are both the same and different. It is the selfsame concept that structures their thoughts, but the individuals do not understand the concept to the same degree. This option has a cost, though, as it means that subjects possess concepts that they incompletely understand.<sup>15</sup> The Hybrid View satisfies our sense that the concepts are both similar and distinct without attributing to subjects concepts they incompletely understand. The content externalist analysis may be able to capture our

<sup>14</sup> I don't mean to suggest that content internalists are committed to these assumptions. It may even be that we have good reason to seriously qualify them or modify them. For instance, Kenyon (2013) has argued that many examples in the philosophical literature about testimony are oversimplified and lend credence to the idea that justification for knowledge based on testimony is non-inferential. This appearance of non-inferential justification could make CP seem more plausible; if testimonial knowledge is direct, then it seems more likely that the very selfsame proposition is transmitted in testimonial knowledge. Goldberg (2009) offers a lengthier defense of CP, largely related to the reliability of knowledge based on testimony. In short, if testimonial knowledge is reliable, then it must be the same proposition that is transmitted. Of course, the truth of CP is likely a complicated affair, and I don't enter into a discussion about its truth here. My approach is to grant the assumptions and show how Content Internalism bolstered by the Hybrid View can satisfy them better than Content Externalism.

<sup>15</sup> As noted earlier, Wikforss (2008) thoroughly discusses this problem.

sense that there is something both similar and distinct in the respective graspings of the public concept, but it cannot also attribute to each subject a concept that he or she completely understands. To sum up: while the content externalist explanation for CP is simpler than the explanation of the Hybrid View, it fails to attribute to subjects concepts that they completely understand. For the Hybrid View, the explanation for how the subjects come to be related to the selfsame proposition is a bit more complex, but it has the important virtue of attributing to subjects conceptions that they completely understand. Let us turn our attention to the next assumption, NU.

(Nature of our Understanding of others' speech acts or NU) For the central cases in which CP holds, what the hearer comes to know—the content of her knowledge—is what she understood the speaker to have asserted in the telling.

The Hybrid View can account for NU as well. As I have been suggesting, the student has a certain understanding of electrons and thus has a certain personal conception ELECTRON. This conception is not the same as the professor's conception ELECTRON.<sup>16</sup> The student's understanding of the public concept ELECTRON is clearly not perfect. But one would not expect it to be. So, the student does not come to form the very same belief as the professor because of her impoverished understanding of electrons. This seems a more natural read, though, than the externalist one. Since Goldberg says that the selfsame proposition is the direct object of knowledge in each case, he must say that the hearer understands the concept that is conveyed in the same way that the expert does, for if what is understood is different, then by NU, what is known is different. This seems implausible, for the non-expert does not understand the assertion in the same way as the expert who makes the utterance. The Hybrid View allows for this divergence in understanding, and therefore for a divergence in the belief that becomes knowledge in the case of the expert and non-expert. Of course, the Hybrid View can also say that these beliefs are similar as their respective intentional contents are typed by the same abstract proposition.

The Hybrid View has no problem squaring with DDKC.

(Doxastic Diversity of Knowledge Communities or DDKC) There is a great diversity of belief among members of a single linguistic community.

In fact, there is more diversity on the Hybrid View than on Content Externalism. Take the belief that electrons are significantly smaller and less massive than nucleons. On the Hybrid View there are many versions of this belief, as there will be subtle variations in the many individual conceptions of electrons and nucleons, so there will be fine gradations among the tokens of this belief type. On the externalist view, the belief is always the same as it is structured by the very same concept ELECTRON in

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that the Hybrid View doesn't entail that the expert and non-expert conceptions must be distinct. It is possible that the two personal conceptions are exactly identical in terms of content. It will just be rare given that experts generally have so much more information about than non-experts in a given domain and thus have informationally richer concepts.



the case of every individual. So, the Hybrid View seems to offer a better account of DDKC than Content Externalism.

One might see the Hybrid View as vulnerable with regard to CDD.

(Comprehension in Doxastic Diversity or CDD) Even substantial doxastic diversity between speaker and hearer does not prevent the hearer's comprehension of the speaker's telling.

Once we allow for individuals to have their own token conceptions that fall under a certain concept type, then we fully capture the subjective point of view but we seem to give up on the possibility that subjects are genuinely communicating with the same concept. Here it must be admitted that no view can guarantee that there is perfect comprehension between speaker and hearer. On the Hybrid View, communication is possible because there is commonality between the conceptions deployed in conversation. There is no guarantee of course that individuals will completely understand each other, though often times the token conceptions are similar enough to ensure that there is enough or adequate comprehension.<sup>17</sup> On Goldberg's view, since one subject can incompletely grasp a concept that constitutes his or her intentional content while another can completely grasp that same concept, we also lose the guarantee that subjects always have the same level of understanding of the concept that structures some thought being communicated; there will still be communication, of course, as long as both subjects have enough of a grasp on the relevant intersubjective concepts. So, each view admits that something is often lost in passing information from expert to non-expert.

The Hybrid View, then, not only accommodates all of these assumptions properly understood, but it does so in a way that is superior to Content Externalism; in short, it allows for the sense in which subjects share the same intersubjective concept and also provides for idiosyncratic variation at the individual level. CP and NU require that subjects in some sense have thoughts structured by the same concept. If one were measuring Content Externalism and the Hybrid View against these two principles only, then Content Externalism would arguably win. If one were to measure the views against just DDKC and CDD, then the Hybrid View would arguably win given its allowance that individuals can think with their own idiosyncratic conceptions, that is, their own personal versions of intersubjective concepts. Measured against all four principles, the Hybrid View is more plausible in the end. The basic reason is that it can account for the sense in which concepts are shared as demanded by CP and NU. By contrast, Content Externalism cannot account for the sense of diversity of belief that is required by DDKC and CDD. Additionally, Content Externalism implausibly attributes to subjects concepts that they do not fully understand, and, importantly, it fails to capture the sense in which the concepts that structure the thoughts of experts and non-experts in knowledge transmission are in a very real sense distinct.

<sup>17</sup> Goldberg (2007) argues that a cost of the Hybrid View is that it cannot properly account for communication. This argument fails to consider the possibility that the Hybrid View can be combined with the Mixed View of Concepts. Such a combination allows subjects to be communicating with the same intersubjective concept type by having personal conceptions (which may diverge slightly) that fall under the same intersubjective concept type.

## 4 Conclusion

I want to close by saying a bit more about the idea of personal conceptions as tokens of concepts as intersubjective types, because this distinction is absolutely crucial to the Hybrid View. Some may find the proffered account incomplete, as I have not stated precisely what makes a personal conception as mental particular fall under an intersubjective concept as abstracta. What makes it the case that my personal conception TIGER and your personal conception TIGER both fall under the intersubjective concept TIGER? As indicted earlier, this is a difficult question that I want to leave relatively open as it turns on some general issues regarding the nature of conceptual analysis. Some theorists may hold that the many particular conceptions of tigers fall under the intersubjective concept TIGER in virtue of meeting some necessary and sufficient conditions. Others may hold that individual conceptions of tigers fall under the intersubjective concept TIGER in virtue of sharing a type of family resemblance that eludes any precise analysis of a concept into necessary and sufficient conditions. I favor the family resemblance account, but I think that defenders of the Hybrid View can disagree about the general question of whether abstract concepts have precise analyses. The main point for the purposes of this paper is that the Hybrid View that Goldberg describes can be supplemented with and supported by the Mixed View of Concepts to resist the dilemma that Goldberg argues faces the content internalist. Not only can it resist the dilemma, but it can also provide a more adequate account of the various features or facts of knowledge transmission between experts and non-experts than Content Externalism when all four assumptions are taken together.

One might be worried that the Hybrid View has trouble with error cases where a non-expert has an erroneous personal conception of an item under discussion. Let us use Burge's original example to make this point. If I believe that arthritis can occur in the muscles, and my doctor tells me that medication X helps with arthritis, then it is questionable whether or not we both have knowledge of the proposition that medication X helps with arthritis given the divergence between our respective personal conceptions. Such cases surely occur and it seems that the proper thing to say is simply that there are failures of knowledge transmission that result from non-experts having an impoverished or erroneous conception of some of the items under discussion. In the case of the respective conceptions associated with 'arthritis' (mine and the doctor's), it seems that they are too divergent for true knowledge transmission without further conceptual correction. The location of arthritis is crucial for its proper conception, so subjects who take arthritis to occur only on the scalp or in the feet or in the muscles simply do not have the proper personal conception for knowledge transmission based on expert testimony. So, these sorts of error cases pose no special problem for the content internalist in this debate.

I have not explored all of the types of content internalist responses because I find the Hybrid View to be the most plausible content internalist response. In the end, the Hybrid View not only has the resources to respond to Goldberg's argument, but it also has the machinery to provide a sophisticated account of all the basic facts that need to be explained regarding the common occurrence of knowledge being transmitted between experts and non-experts on the basis of testimony.

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