

Interpretive Charity and Content Externalism

Interpretive charity is an important principle in devising the content of propositional attitudes and their expression. I want to argue that it does not square well with externalism about content. Although my argument clearly also applies to a principle of maximizing truth (as it requires only the true belief - component of knowledge), I will focus my attention to Timothy Williamson's more intriguing recent proposal of maximizing knowledge:

"The proposal is to replace true belief by knowledge in a principle of charity constitutive of content."¹

Williamson's idea can be put thus: The system of sentences by virtue of which a speaker is disposed to state her propositional attitudes is to be assigned referents such as to let the maximum number of these attitudes amount to knowledge.

I want to raise the following objection: It is questionable whether Williamson's proposal squares with externalism about content which he accepts.² Since the content of an individual's thought is socially determined by the concepts used in a community of speakers, it would be a coincidence if this content were to maximize the individual's knowledge.

The following example is inspired by George Bealer noting that his *Webster's* provides him with two understandings of 'polygon': A polygon might be a) a closed, straight-sided plane figure or b) a closed, straight-sided plane figure with five or more sides.³ Assume a community only endorses understanding (a). Mathematician Alfred is fully initiated in the respective social practice and uses 'polygon' in sense (a). He is a paragon of knowing things about polygons, for instance that triangles are polygons. Assume that the practice of using 'polygon' in his community slowly changes towards sense (b) without him noticing it. At some point, only sense (b) remains. But Alfred retains his beliefs as manifested in dispositions

to say things like ‘triangles are polygons’. When sufficient time has passed, according to externalist lore it is our practice to ascribe to him beliefs not about polygons in sense (a) but in sense (b). Hence certain knowledge attributions cannot be any longer upheld. Taking him by his words, one cannot any longer ascribe knowledge to him that triangles are polygons in sense (a). Rather one must ascribe to him a false belief that triangles are polygons in sense (b).⁴ But apparently nothing excludes imagining Alfred’s belief system to have the following peculiarity: If his words were taken to retain their original meaning (a), he would have more knowledge than according to externalist ascriptive practice, for instance knowledge that triangles are polygons.⁵ If so, knowledge maximization recommends interpreting his beliefs in sense (a).

If externalism about content is to be reconcilable with knowledge maximization, there must be some mechanism by which the latter keeps track of changes in social linguistic practice. Once the advocate of knowledge maximization accepts externalism, the burden of devising such a mechanism is on him. Moreover, being prone to taking Alfred’s beliefs literally, we do not seem to care whether there be a mechanism by which literalness tracks knowledge maximization.⁶ How can the advocate of knowledge maximization account for this practice?

Note that the point does not depend on but is merely rendered more salient by the example of a change in linguistic practice. It could also be illustrated by everyday cases of incomplete understanding, failing to conform to communal practice for other reasons.⁷

Consider several objections to my example:

(i) Objection: A general strategy against my example is to insist that knowledge claims are undermined by their dependence on factors which change with communal linguistic practice, say according to the principle ‘no false lemma’. Alfred’s beliefs could depend on metalinguistic beliefs which are rendered false by linguistic developments:⁸ “‘Polygon’ in our language also applies to planes with less than four sides.”

Reply: Tyler Burge notes that people started with object-level beliefs and only later began to form metalinguistic ones:

“In fact, there seems to be a general presumption that a person is reasoning at the object level, other things being equal. The basis for this presumption is that metalinguistic reasoning requires a certain self-consciousness about one’s words and social institutions. This sort of sophistication emerged rather late in human history (Cf. any history of linguistics).”⁹

Surely someone mastering complex words like ‘polygon’ will be in a position to form explicit metalinguistic beliefs.¹⁰ Nevertheless, if Burge is right, object-level beliefs can be sufficiently independent of metalinguistic beliefs about the words by which they are expressed to exclude that, in order to be knowledge, beliefs about polygons *must* depend on metalinguistic ones, e.g. about the role of ‘polygon’ in a language.

(ii) Objection: If we retain interpretation (a), Alfred normally will have plenty of false beliefs about the world, for instance he might be prone to state: ‘According to my fellows’ linguistic practice, triangles are polygons.’ Hence there will be a trade-off between knowledge he gains and knowledge he loses according to the respective interpretation.

Reply: This does not mean that there cannot be situations in which the false beliefs are outweighed by the gain in knowledge an interpretation diverging from the externalist lay of the land delivers. At least Williamson does not give reasons to suppose otherwise.

(iii) Objection: We might expect that knowledge should be stable if information is augmented. Now there is plenty of relevant information which would amount to revising Alfred’s claims to knowledge if it were revealed to him. Alfred’s alleged knowledge of polygons is not stable. If he were to have all relevant information, he would be prone to say: ‘Alas, triangles are not polygons.’

Reply: Here we must carefully consider where the problem comes from. Any countervailing evidence Alfred may be confronted with is due to communal linguistic practice and not due to independent mathematical facts. Triangles still are closed, straight-sided plane figures. If Alfred were only to maximize knowledge and did not aim at conforming to communal linguistic practice as well, he might not retract his knowledge claim. Alfred's reaction shows and our attributional practice demands that Alfred defers to his linguistic community in the ways he represents his knowledge. If knowledge maximization were at stake, his attitude of deferring to his community would seem questionable. For he could never be sure whether he sufficiently conformed to communal practice to attain an optimum of knowledge given his epistemic situation. Perhaps he would fare better in terms of knowledge by using his words with an idiosyncratic meaning.

(iv) Objection: A way for Williamson to cope with the case of Alfred might be to change from maximizing an individual's to maximizing knowledge in a community.

Reply: The problem is that knowledge in a community must supervene on what the members of this community know. No reason has been given why maximizing the individuals' knowledge by reinterpreting some of their concepts so as to diverge from communal assessment in the way just outlined should not contribute to maximizing knowledge in a community.

To sum it up, if content is to supervene on communal practice, there seems to be no reason why it should at the same time maximize knowledge. Of course, provided our ascriptive practice rests on a principle of charity, the latter may require to *ceteris paribus* grant the individual as much knowledge as possible. But according to externalist lore, literalness is relevant, too. *Ceteris paribus*, one should take a speaker by her public words, even if this means, within limits, ascribing to her less knowledge and more false beliefs than a more fine-grained, idiosyncratic carving of content would yield.¹¹

¹ Williamson, T. (2007). *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 64

² Cf. Williamson 2007, p. 97-98

³ Cf. Bealer, G. (2002). "Modal Epistemology and the Rationalist Renaissance," in T. Szabó Gendler, J. Hawthorne (eds) *Conceivability and Possibility*, 71-125. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2002, p. 103. Both alternatives seem perfectly natural. Hence they fulfil Williamson's naturalness constraint (2007, p. 268).

⁴ Cf. Boghossian's discussion (Boghossian, P. (1994). "The Transparency of Mental Content", *Philosophical Perspectives* 8. pp. 33-50, pp. 37-39).

⁵ The example can also be used against an unrestrained principle of determining reference by maximizing true belief.

⁶ Williamson accepts this inclination towards literal ascription when he considers "...actual native speakers of English who deny that a man who has lived with a partner for several years without getting married is a bachelor... We classify them as believing that some unmarried men are not bachelors ... because we interpret them as having used the words with their normal English meanings, despite their errors. This is how they intend to be interpreted, not as using the words with idiosyncratic senses."(2007, p. 118)

⁷ Consider 'chofa':

"For example, one can imagine a generally competent, rational adult having a large number of attitudes involving the notion of sofas- including beliefs that those (some sofas) are sofas, that some sofas are beige, that his neighbors have a new sofa, that he would rather sit in a sofa for an hour than on a church pew. In addition, he might think that sufficiently broad (but single-seat) overstuffed armchairs are sofas."(Burge, T. (1998). "Individualism and the Mental," in P. Ludlow, N. Martin (eds) *Externalism and Self-Knowledge*. Stanford: CSLI Publications, pp. 21-83, p. 30)

There does not seem to be a problem to imagine the adult, let him be Alfred, having a belief system and suitable evidence which would amount to maximum knowledge if he were attributed a notion `chofa' which applies to single-seat overstuffed armchairs as well (Burge 1998, p. 48). For now he may have knowledge that *chofas* comprise single-seat overstuffed armchairs. Such knowledge might rest on evidence as perceiving seats and sofas which are stuffed in the same way, sofas and seats being sold together and so on.

⁸ Cf. Georgalis, N. (1999). "Rethinking Burge's Thought Experiment," *Synthese* 118, pp. 145-64.

⁹ Burge, 1998, p. 53

¹⁰ But remember the sofa/chofa-example (note 7). Imagine someone who is extremely simple-minded. He has no metalinguistic beliefs at all but only some object-level ones, among them beliefs which would amount to knowledge of chofas.

¹¹ Thanks to Fritz and Schmitz.