The
Philosophical
Quarterly

The Scots Philosophical Association
and the University of St Andrews

HOW TO USE A CONCEPT YOU REJECT

By Mark McCullagh

Inferentialist accounts of concept possession are often supported by examples in which rejection of some inference seems to amount to rejection of some concept, with the apparently implausible consequence that anyone who rejects the inference cannot so much as understand those who use the concept. This consequence can be avoided by distinguishing conditions necessary for direct uses of a concept (to describe the non-cognitive world) from conditions necessary for content-specifying uses (to specify what someone thinks or says). I consider how this claim about the non-uniformity of concept possession accords with different theories of attitude ascription and with claims about reverse compositionality. Surprisingly little stands in the way of the claim that someone unable to use a concept directly can nevertheless satisfy conditions for using it in a content-specifying thought.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many philosophers maintain that possessing a given concept requires endorsing certain characteristic inferences. Timothy Williamson has recently objected to this view, arguing that whichever inferential relations are held to be necessary for possessing some concept, it is possible for those who reject the inferences none the less to *understand* someone who uses the concept, and thereby to possess it themselves; hence acceptance of these inferences is not necessary for possessing the concept.[1]

Williamson's is a novel and powerful objection. Indeed, when only slightly fleshed out, it is a sound argument. Its very simplicity and soundness, however, should make us ask whether the intuitions on which inferential-role theorists rely need to be elaborated in a way that is vulnerable to it. In this paper I explain why those intuitions need not be generalized into the claim which Williamson takes as his target: they can be generalized into a different claim which is consistent with the conclusion of his argument. For we can distinguish between the conditions necessary for using a concept in a content-specifying way, paradigmatically in a *de dicto* speech report or

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[1] T. Williamson, 'Understanding and Inference', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 77 (2003), pp. 249–93.

attitude ascription, and the conditions necessary for using the concept directly (that is, not in a content-specifying way). This distinction allows one to endorse the inferential-role theorists' basic claims about concept possession, since these concern direct uses of concepts, while acknowledging the soundness of Williamson's argument, since it rests on facts about content-specifying uses.

There is nothing particularly inferentialist about the distinction on which the proposal rests: even Williamson's view of concept possession is consistent with the claim that conditions for content-specifying uses can differ from conditions for direct uses. The proposal does, however, invite the objection that it flies in the face of certain obviously true general principles about concept possession, e.g., that the ability to think some content entails the ability to think any of its components. Despite their seeming obviousness, however, there is little to be said for these sweeping principles, and they meet counter-examples elsewhere; so the philosopher who shares the inferential-role theorists' basic intuitions and appreciates the soundness of Williamson's argument has more reason to reject than accept them.

II. THE DEBATE

II.1. *Inferential role accounts of concept possession*

When philosophers speak of 'possessing' a concept, they usually mean to refer to the ability to form some thoughts or beliefs whose contents have the concept as a component: to possess the concept NEUTRINO is to be able to think or believe such things as *that neutrinos are small*; to possess the concept AND is to be able to think or believe such things as *that Kansas City is partly in Kansas and partly in Missouri*. We can ask what it takes to have such abilities. Some philosophers say that for many concepts there are certain inferences which one must be committed to making, or be disposed to make, in order to possess the concept. I shall say that one is an 'inferential role theorist', or an 'IR theorist', if one's theory of concepts has such a claim as a consequence.[2]

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[2] By this criterion recent IR theorists include at least C. Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts* (MIT Press, 1992), and *The Realm of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); R. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Harvard UP, 1994); P. Boghossian, 'Blind Reasoning', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supp. Vol. 77 (2003), pp. 225–48. These theorists mostly work with the received notion of possession. Brandom usually writes of 'grasp' of a concept instead of 'possession', but uses that locution in accord with the received meaning of 'possess'. Boghossian writes of 'the possession-conditions for a concept' (starting on p. 241), and although he does not explain what he means by the phrase, he does take it that someone's being able to 'express complete thoughts' with a concept entails that they possess it. (Only then does it make sense for him to present (p. 243) the claim that racists can 'express complete thoughts' using the word 'Boche'

Some IR theorists have illustrated their view by applying it to cases in which someone refuses to employ a concept.[3] Michael Dummett introduced the example of this sort which is most discussed, claiming of the word 'Boche' that 'The condition for applying the term to someone is that he is of German nationality; the consequences of its application are that he is barbarous and more prone to cruelty than other Europeans'.[4] Robert Brandom (p. 126) claims that this example

> shows how concepts can be criticized on the basis of substantive beliefs. If one does not believe that the inference from German nationality to cruelty is a good one, one must refuse to employ the concept *Boche*. For one cannot deny that there are any Boche – that is just denying that anyone is German, which is patently false. One cannot admit that there are Boche and deny that they are cruel – that is just attempting to take back with one claim what one has committed oneself to with another. One can only refuse to employ the concept, on the grounds that it embodies an inference one does not endorse.

He claims that the phenomenon is not limited to pejorative concepts: one should eschew any concept which embodies an inference one does not endorse.[5]

In the same vein Paul Boghossian claims ('Blind Reasoning', p. 242) that one possesses the concept BOCHE if and only if one is 'willing to infer' according to the following inference rules (which I shall refer to as 'the B rules'):

$$\frac{x \text{ is German}}{x \text{ is Boche}} \qquad \frac{x \text{ is Boche}}{x \text{ is cruel}}$$

He also proposes (p. 246) an account of what makes a concept 'epistemically defective', and presumably to be rejected; on the account he offers, BOCHE is epistemically defective although it is a genuine concept.

It is easy to see why Dummett's example impresses Brandom and Boghossian. It does well for their purpose, compared with other cases in which it is far less clear that rejecting some inferences amounts to rejecting a

as a problem for the claim about concept possession which he formulates on p. 241.) For Peacocke, on the other hand, possession is rather a technical notion. He distinguishes between possession-conditions and attribution-conditions, the latter not requiring 'full mastery' (p. 29) of a concept, the former sufficing to individuate a concept (p. 47). The latter notion is closer than the former to what Brandom means by 'grasp' and Boghossian means by 'possession'.

[3] The reason why Peacocke does not figure in my discussion of the debate about rejected concepts is that on his view, only a thinker mistaken about the very nature of concepts can reject one in the way that Brandom and Boghossian describe. He would count 'Boche' as expressing a 'spurious' concept (*A Study of Concepts*, p. 21). So although the proposal I shall make does not on its own conflict with Peacocke's view of concept possession, it is supported by examples unavailable to him, a claim about which is the proximal target of Williamson's objection.

[4] M.A. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Harvard UP, 1973), p. 454.

[5] Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 127; see also his *Articulating Reasons* (Harvard UP, 2000), pp. 70–2.

concept. Intuitionistic logicians, for example, disagree with classical logicians about the inferential roles of certain sentences. But it is far from clear that they thereby reject some concept. They might maintain that it is not the contested logical *concept* they reject but the classical interpretation of it. So it would be much less plausible to say of this what Boghossian says (p. 241) of Boche, that it is one of the 'clear cases where the acceptance of some inference is written into the possession of a given concept'.

There are differences between Brandom's and Boghossian's positions on concept possession. One is that Boghossian seeks to formulate a criterion of epistemic acceptability which can be applied *a priori*, whereas Brandom is content to hold that whether one should employ or reject a concept may depend on one's empirical commitments. Another is that while Brandom writes of what one is *committed* to inferring, Boghossian writes of what one is *willing* to infer. The objection to be considered here goes through equally well no matter which of these notions is used. (Accordingly, for brevity's sake I shall use *acceptance* as a placeholder notion.) In this respect it is superior to some other objections which Williamson has made against IR accounts.[6]

II.2. *The objection*

Williamson ('Understanding and Inference', p. 257) objects as follows to the claim that accepting the B rules is a necessary condition for possessing the concept Boche.[7]

> I think that I am one counterexample, and that Boghossian is another. Unlike someone who thinks that the word 'Boche' means *master*, we both fully understand the word, for we understand the sentences in which it occurs that racists utter; we know that it means *Boche*. We find racist and xenophobic abuse offensive because we understand it, not because we fail to do so. Presumably, therefore, we have the concept *Boche*. Yet neither of us is willing to infer according to [the B rules].

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[6] Since Brandom specifies concept possession in terms of which inferences one is *obliged* or *permitted* to make, he can say of several examples Williamson adduces in 'Understanding and Inference' and 'Conceptual Truth' that they merely illustrate a possibility he acknowledges, indeed, repeatedly insists on (*Making It Explicit*, pp. 137, 237, 525), namely, that people may not be *disposed* to make an inference which they are nevertheless obliged or permitted to make. Williamson in 'Understanding and Inference' acknowledges this, but judges Brandom's overall position unsatisfying. He notes also that it does not suit Boghossian's epistemological aims. Brandom would agree with that second point, since he has no use for the notion of *a priori* knowledge.

[7] Paul Horwich, 'Stipulation, Meaning, and Apriority', in P. Boghossian and C. Peacocke (eds), *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 150–69, at p. 158, earlier made the same point about an intuitionistic logician who rejects classical inference rules: 'we need not suppose that he is thereby prevented from appreciating what we mean by our logical terms'. But he was not objecting Williamson-style to an IR claim about concept possession. I have explained in §II.1 above why the intuitionism/classicism debate in logic is not a good test case for IR claims about concept possession.

It is important to see that Williamson is not here making what one might call a *full-on* objection to the Brandom–Boghossian line. A full-on objection would start from the claim that someone who does not accept the B rules can judge, say, *that Klaus is a Boche*. Rather, Williamson takes the data about use, or apparent use, at face value: those who do not accept the B rules do not make such judgements. (Nor does Williamson deny Brandom's claim that non-racists do not even judge the negations of the judgements.)

It is fair to break down Williamson's objection into the following steps.

1. Some people who do not accept the B rules understand some BOCHE statements (i.e., statements containing a word which expresses that concept)
2. If one understands a BOCHE statement, then one can have thoughts or beliefs whose contents have BOCHE as a component
3. If one can have thoughts or beliefs whose contents have BOCHE as a component, then one possesses that concept
4. Therefore some people who do not accept the B rules possess the concept BOCHE.

Here premise (1) states what Williamson takes to be data, and this seems unobjectionable. Premise (3) unobjectionably makes explicit the received conception of 'possession', in terms of which the target claim is expressed.

What about premise (2)? What BOCHE-involving contents can be judged or believed by those who do not accept the B rules? Williamson's is not a full-on objection, so they are not contents such as *that Klaus is a Boche* or *that Klaus is not a Boche*. How then is premise (2) supported? Since the crucial datum for Williamson is that non-racists can *understand* what racists say, the contents that he is claiming non-racists can judge or believe must be those that comprise this understanding. When they hear and understand John's assertion that Klaus is a Boche, for example, non-racists believe *that John said that Klaus is a Boche* and *that John thinks that Klaus is a Boche*. When they reflect on the word 'Boche', they judge *that to apply the word 'Boche' to a man is to call him a Boche*, or (as Williamson says) *that it means 'Boche'*. Non-racists probably believe that those who do predicate Bocheness infer it from Germanness. Since they accept no such inferences themselves, they do not believe *that being German makes you a Boche*; rather, their understanding of the racists' use is expressed in a judgement *that to think of a man that he is a Boche requires thinking of him that he is German*.

All these are cases in which someone who does not accept the B rules nevertheless judges or believes a content which at least appears to have the concept BOCHE as a component.[8] But each of these is a content-specifying

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[8] I say 'appears', because there are views concerning the logical form of 'that'-clauses on which this is not the case; I discuss such views in the next section.

judgement, one which is itself about the contents of judgements, assertions or beliefs. In none of these cases does the subject judge something of the form *x is a Boche*. To have some terminology, I shall say that if one performs a speech act, or is in a mental state, with a content of the former sort, then one makes a *content-specifying* use of the concept; otherwise one makes a *direct* use of it. Content-specifying uses are usually marked by the occurrence of words within 'that'-clauses, but not always (as in 'call him a Boche').

The fact that Williamson's argument rests on a claim about content-specifying uses of concepts is largely what guides the proposal I shall make for reconciling his argument with the IR theorists' claim that concepts have inferential posession-conditions. But before explaining my proposal, I should discuss other ways of responding to Williamson's argument.

II.3. *Other reactions to Williamson's argument*

One reaction to Williamson's argument is to think that the IR theorist can avoid it simply by revising the claims about the conditions necessary for possessing the particular concept in question. It might seem easy to do this, given that there is no general principle from which IR theorists deduce those claims.[9] But there are several reasons why this will not do. First, it is obviously *ad hoc*. Secondly, there is the risk that revised counter-examples would work against the revised conditions. Finally, IR theorists should resist such a move, since it means abandoning their central claims about a showpiece example.[10]

Another reaction could be to maintain that the understanding credited to the non-racist is too meagre to count as concept possession. The problem with this rejoinder is that all the argument needs is that there may be *some* degree of understanding which consists (at least partly) in mental states whose contents have the concept as a component; and it is very implausible that there is no such degree of understanding for a non-racist to have. Indeed, there is no reason to say that a non-racist is precluded in principle from understanding Boche statements as clearly as those who make them.

This leads to another way to object to Williamson's argument, which is to deny the link it presupposes between understanding and concept possession. One could maintain that the concept Boche is *not* a component of the thoughts and beliefs which comprise one's understanding of another's uses

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[9] J. Fodor and E. Lepore, *Holism: a Shopper's Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), press this point in their objections to conceptual role accounts of meaning and content.

[10] D.J. Whiting, 'Conservatives and Racists: Inferential Role Semantics and Pejoratives', *Philosophia*, 36 (2008), pp. 375–88, makes a proposal of this sort, pointing out that the IR theorist can say that 'Boche' means the same as 'German', so possession of the former concept requires acceptance of just the same inferences as possession of the latter (*modulo* the requisite substitutions).

of the concept, and that it follows that having the understanding does not require possessing the concept. (This objection differs from the previous one, since the point would apply whatever the *amount* of understanding.) In support of this objection one could point to views on which the concept BOCHE is not a component, in logical form, of contents such as *that John thinks that Klaus is a Boche*. On quotational views of attitude-ascriptive discourse,[11] words in 'that'-clauses are quoted rather than used; on Davidson's paratactic view they occur outside the sentence, as *demonstrata*.[12] Such views could seem to entail that someone can think *that John thinks that Klaus is a Boche* while not possessing the concept BOCHE, and that all that is required is (on a quotational view) the ability to quote a word that expresses BOCHE, or (on the paratactic view) the ability to demonstrate a token some part of which expresses it.[13]

The flaw in this reasoning is that the claims about logical form do not entail the claim about concept possession. There is more to an account of attitude-ascriptive mental states, and speech acts, than a claim about logical form; and the auxiliary claims with which the aforementioned claims about logical form are accompanied can in fact be adduced in *support* of Williamson's view on the link between understanding and concept possession. It is worth explaining this in terms of Davidson's account, since I shall consider later (§IV.2) how this account relates to the proposal I shall make for reconciling IR accounts with Williamson's objection to them.[14] On Davidson's account, the logical form of 'Galileo said that the earth moves' is

$$(\exists x)(\text{Says}(\text{Galileo}, x) \land \text{Samesays}(x, that))$$

where

(i) 'the "that" is a demonstrative singular term referring to an utterance (not a sentence)' (Davidson, 'On Saying That', p. 105)

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[11] See, e.g., I. Scheffler, 'An Inscriptional Approach to Indirect Quotation', *Analysis*, 14 (1954), pp. 83–90.

[12] D. Davidson, 'On Saying That', *Synthese*, 19 (1968), pp. 130–46, repr. in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 93–108.

[13] I am setting out the objection generously by ignoring qualms about applying views about attitude-ascriptive *utterances* to content-specifying *thoughts* or *beliefs*.

[14] For a relatively recent example of how the quotational theorist too makes a move that supports Williamson's conception of the understanding-possession link, see M. Seymour, 'A Sentential Theory of Propositional Attitudes', *Journal of Philosophy*, 89 (1992), pp. 181–201. Seymour says that when we use 'John believes that neutrinos have mass' to ascribe a particular belief, the logical form is 'believes(John, "neutrinos have mass")'. He says, however, that in this form 'it is as though [the sentence "neutrinos have mass"] were simultaneously used and mentioned' (p. 194). This is not what the quotation marks would lead one to expect, but Seymour recognizes that without some such qualification a quotational account is implausible. The upshot is that his quotational account actually *supports* the claim that BOCHE is a component of judgements which specify BOCHE thoughts *de dicto*.

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(ii) the demonstrated utterance may be 'done in the mode of assertion or play. But if it is as announced, it must serve at least the purpose of conveying the content of what someone said' (pp. 106–7).

On this view, nothing corresponding to 'earth' or 'moves' figures in the logical form. But it does not follow from this that speakers who lack the concepts those words express can none the less pull off the speech act Davidson describes. (This is the inference upon which the objection relied.) For in order to do so they must not only produce the ascriptive sentence; they must do so in such a way as to make (i) and (ii) true. This requires that the tokens they utter of 'earth' and 'moves' have the requisite contents; but only by possessing MOVES can one use 'moves' to mean MOVES. Thus Williamson's conception of the understanding-possession link is vindicated even on the paratactic view of content-specifying discourse.

(Incidentally, one could still object that even though Williamson's conception of the link has been vindicated, my breakdown of it into (2) and (3) has not been, for Davidson's account does not require that the MOVE-expressing use of 'move' must be made as part of an *assertion* or *belief*: it could be 'done in the mode of assertion *or play*'. (This is essential to the account; otherwise it would entail that ascribing an assertion involves making it oneself.) This is true, but since what matters for Williamson is (4), Davidsonians can still maintain that his objection works against the IR theorists' views.)

Finally, one might think that the dispute might be settled by an investigation of the semantics of pejorative words. That topic is substantial and interesting in its own right. Moreover, some have argued that pejoratives do not admit of inferentialist treatment.[15] But an objection of this sort differs from the one with which I am presently concerned, which could just as well be run using non-pejorative vocabulary that embodies inferences we reject. If instead of the B rules we had rules taking one from attributions of Germanness via attributions of Bocheness to attributions of ambidexterity, it would be equally plausible to object that someone who does not accept the inferences can still *understand* those who do.

III. THE PROPOSAL

In my view, Williamson's argument is not only plausible but sound. It establishes the truth of (4) and thereby refutes the claim which is his target. My aim in this paper is to show that nevertheless this is not a problem for IR theorists, because the target claim is not the only general claim which their

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[15] J. Hornsby, 'Meaning and Uselessness: How to Think about Derogatory Words', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 25 (2001), pp. 128–41.

intuitions about Boche support. There is a different general claim which better reflects those intuitions, and which is not threatened at all by Williamson's argument.

We can acknowledge the soundness of Williamson's argument while also saying that the IR theorists are right about the conditions necessary *for the uses of a concept they focus on*, namely, those which figure in the inference rules they state. The reason why we can do this is that Williamson's argument gives us no reason to doubt that those conditions are necessary for *those* uses. What it does give us reason to deny is that those conditions are necessary for the uses on which his argument relies, namely, content-specifying uses.

III.1. *Inference rules and possession conditions*

I shall approach this point by reflecting on a feature of the inference rules we are dealing with. The B rules specify inferences according to the forms of the contents that occur in them. The only Boche-involving form occurring in the B rules is the form '*x* is a Boche'. Since there are Boche contents which are not of that form, the B rules *directly* govern only a proper subset of the possible thought contents involving the concept Boche. They do not tell you what to infer from, or from what to infer, your belief *that John thinks that Germans are Boches*.[16] This is a general point, not just one about rejected concepts. Rules specifying what to do with contents of certain forms, containing a certain concept, do not specify what to do with contents containing that concept which are not of those forms. (Of course there are some inference rules, such as conjunction introduction, which specify inferences whose premises are statements of any forms. But this is not generally the case, and it is certainly not the case for every rule which plausibly reflects facts about a concept expressed by an item of non-logical vocabulary.)

Eschewing talk of 'possession' for the moment, we may ask what does and does not follow from a claim that some inference rule *r* governs some set *s* of contents involving a concept *c*. The rule tells you what to do, inference-wise, with contents that are in this set, but it is silent concerning contents outside the set. Saying that this rule is somehow constitutively related to the concept *c* seems to justify saying that if you do not accept *r* then there is something essential to *c* which you are not getting. But your not getting it shows only in your handling of contents that are in *s*. So on its own, the initial claim at most implies that you must accept rule *r* in order to be able to have thoughts or beliefs *whose contents are in s*.

'On its own' is an important qualification. In general, on an IR view, there are other rules, constitutive for possession of other concepts, requiring

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[16] Or, as Williamson notes in 'Understanding and Inference', p. 260, what to infer from *He owns a Boche car*.

thinkers of some *c*-thoughts which are not in *s* to be able to have some *c*-thoughts which are in *s*; when this happens, acceptance of *r* kicks in as a necessary condition for the *c*-thoughts outside *s* as well. Suppose, for example, that acceptance of conjunction elimination is a necessary condition for judging contents of the form *p and q*, and that acceptance of disjunction elimination is necessary for judging contents of the form *p or q*. Then judging *that not-r* and *that (p and q) or r* requires accepting inferences to *that p and q*, and for the judgement of this, acceptance of conjunction elimination is, by hypothesis, a necessary condition. It follows that this acceptance is a necessary condition for judging some non-conjunctive contents, even though the rule itself specifies only inferences whose premises are conjunctive. The proposal I am about to make requires considering the possibility of such interactions among possession-conditions for different concepts.

III.2. *The proposal*

Returning to the general point, there is good reason to take claim (A) to support claim (B) below:

A. Thoughts of the form '*x* is a Boche' are governed by the B rules
B. To be able to have any thought or belief of the form '*x* is a Boche' one must accept the B rules.

But there is no reason to take (A) on its own – that is, without interactions of the sort just described – to support the claim which is the target of Williamson's argument, namely,

C. To be able to have *any* Boche thoughts or beliefs, one must accept the B rules.

This suggests what needs to be explored is whether the IR theorists can generalize from (A) to (B), rather than to (C).

First, do the IR theorists' intuitions give any support to (C) beyond what they give to (B)?

The IR theorists under discussion are definitely committed to the claim that accepting the B rules is a necessary condition for having thoughts or beliefs of the form '*x* is a Boche': that is, they are definitely committed to claim (B). This claim is supported by plausible intuitions about interpretation, that when we attribute to others the belief that Klaus is a Boche, say, we attribute to them a belief that Klaus is cruel.[17] There are no

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[17] IR theorists can say things like this without implying that *every* claim which counts in some sense as definitive of some concept underwrites belief attributions in this manner, *contra* T. Burge, 'Individualism and the Mental', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4 (1979), pp. 73–121. Burge argues persuasively that there are some such claims which do not (e.g., the claim that arthritis is a joint ailment). But he does not claim that there are none which do.

plausible intuitions about interpretation which support the corresponding claim about thoughts in which Boche is used in a content-specifying way. If there were, then there would be nothing intuitive about Williamson's objection, which rests on the claim that in such cases acceptance of the B rules is *not* required. The IR theorist should accept the claims on which Williamson's objection rests, e.g., that someone can attribute to Susan a belief *that Gerald thinks that Klaus is a Boche*, that is, can attribute to Susan *understanding* of Gerald's belief, without attributing to her acceptance of the B rules.

So the intuitions which support (B) do not go so far as to support (C): there are cases which are, intuitively, counter-examples to (C) but not to (B). This suggests that the right way for IR theorists to generalize from their intuitions about Boche and the B rules is to make claim (B), not to make claim (C). Claim (B) is consistent with (4), the conclusion of Williamson's argument: the conjunction of (4) and (B) is true if and only if some people who reject the B rules can have *some* Boche thoughts even though they cannot have thoughts or beliefs of the form '*x* is a Boche'. This is the situation when non-racists understand others who have thoughts of that form.

The upshot is that there are some inferences acceptance of which is necessary for using a concept directly but not for using it in a content-specifying way. Accordingly, you can 'possess' a concept enough to be able to use it in ascriptions of thoughts and beliefs, while not 'possessing' it enough to be able to apply it yourself – say on the basis of observation, or by inference from contents in which it does not occur.

IV. REMARKS ON THE PROPOSAL

IV.1. *Implications of rejecting (C)*

Does rejecting (C) commit the IR theorist to saying there are *no* inferences acceptance of which is necessary for using Boche in content-specifying thoughts and beliefs? Not at all: the falsity of one claim about what is necessary does not entail the falsity of all others. The IR theorist can deny (C) while maintaining that there are inferences other than those specified by the B rules, acceptance of which is necessary either for using Boche in a content-specifying way, or for using it in any way whatsoever. One possible suggestion is this: that it is a necessary condition for Susan's making *any* use of Boche that she takes the B rules to govern *direct* uses of it. (This is consistent with everything asserted by Williamson and the IR theorists concerning Boche.) That Susan satisfies this condition does not require her to accept the B rules, since she can take those rules to govern direct uses of

Boche without making any such use herself. But it does require her to accept certain inferences among *attributions* of direct uses. (No such inference is a B rule inference.) The idea is that she must accept inferences such as the following:

S believes that *X* is German	
S believes that some people are Boche	*S* believes that *X* is Boche
S believes that *X* is Boche	*S* believes that *X* is cruel

Whether this particular suggestion is ultimately defensible is not an issue that my purpose here requires me to pursue; I describe it only to illustrate how there is a great deal of room for the IR theorist who denies (C) to describe other more plausible inferential conditions, either for all uses of some concept, or for content-specifying uses specifically. But some remarks on the wider dialectical context are perhaps in order.

I noted above (fn. 9) that IR theorists have been criticized for basing claims such as (B) on intuitions about particular concepts rather than deriving them from some general principle. The suggestion just described is also open to this criticism. The point relevant here, though, is that in whatever way claims such as (B) are available, if they are, then so too are other claims, more plausible than (C), governing other kinds of use of a concept. My reconciliatory proposal does not *introduce* a reason to doubt the availability of such claims. (It could seem to do so, of course, to anyone who takes it that *only* by generalizing in the manner of the move from (B) to (C) can IR theorists arrive at claims concerning concept possession. If, as I argue, there is no reason for IR theorists to make such moves, and good reason, supplied by Williamson, not to, then there is even less reason to think that IR theorists should limit themselves to arriving at claims about concept possession only by this means.)

Another question is whether by maintaining that there are inferences acceptance of which is necessary for employing a given concept directly, but not necessary for employing it in a content-specifying way, one is in effect assigning different contents to that concept, depending on how it is used. Certainly there are possible proposals concerning possession-conditions which would invite such a charge. One could propose, for example, that in order to use some concept in one way, one must accept inferences from *p* to *q* and reject inferences from *p* to *r*, while to use it in another way, one must reject the former inferences and accept the latter. (Unsurprisingly, it is hard to see what plausible claims about interpretation could support a proposal of this sort.) My proposal is nothing like this, however: there is no inference one must accept in order to use Boche directly but must reject in order to use it in a content-specifying way, or *vice versa*. The proposal requires neither

the racist nor the non-racist to shift inferential gears, so to speak, in moving from using Boche directly to using it in a content-specifying way.

One might still ask whether the proposal means that Boche has for the non-racist an overall inferential role different from its role for the racist, even if neither is required to shift gears when moving from a use of one kind to a use of another. If it has, does this not amount to a difference in content? The proposal says that acceptance of the B rules is necessary only for direct uses of Boche; so it allows that the racist infers differently from the non-racist upon judging that Klaus is German (even though both thinkers can employ Boche in content-specifying thoughts). *Of course* there are differences between a racist's and a non-racist's employment of a racist concept. (The mistake which Williamson exposes is to think that Boche can play *no* role in the thoughts of non-racists; acknowledging this does not require maintaining, absurdly, that the overall inferential role of this concept in their thoughts can be the same as its role in the thoughts of racists.) But there is no intuitive reason to say that these differences amount to a difference in content. For there is no 'Boche' utterance which seems to demand different paraphrases depending on whether it is uttered by the (B-rule-accepting) racist or by the (B-rule-rejecting) non-racist. The only candidates would be ones governed by the B rules; but the B rules govern direct uses of Boche, and it is agreed on both sides of the debate that the non-racist makes no such uses.

IV.2. *Relations to theories of attitude ascription*

Since the proposal I have made involves a claim about conditions necessary for having content-specifying thoughts and beliefs, the question arises whether there is any particular account of these thoughts which conflicts with the claim that one may be able to use a concept in a content-specifying thought but be unable to use it directly. I shall consider several leading accounts of *de dicto* attitude ascription – Davidson's paratactic account; the possible-worlds account, particularly as elaborated by Stalnaker; Frege's account; and structured-proposition accounts. (Although I did say that by 'content-specifying' I mean to include more than just *de dicto* ascriptive uses, I focus on the latter in this section, since it is in relation to these that the question of my proposal's compatibility with theories of attitude ascription arises.)

But to start with, two general points. The first is that some of these accounts conflict with the IR theorists' view that it is possible for a concept to be governed by inferences which preclude assigning it an extension. For on some of these views, every concept *necessarily* has an extension (perhaps empty, but well defined none the less). This claim about the nature of

concepts certainly does support an objection to the IR theorists' views.[18] But it differs from the objection I am dealing with in this paper, which is based not on any theory of concepts but on an intuitively plausible claim about the *understanding* available even to someone who rejects those inferences acceptance of which IR theorists say is necessary for possessing some concept. My focus in this section, accordingly, is not on the question of whether there is something *in the nature of concepts* which makes it impossible for a concept to be governed by inferences which no extension makes truth-preserving. It is on the separate question of whether there is something *in the nature of attitude ascription* which makes it impossible for speakers to ascribe a belief, assertion or judgement with a content which they cannot themselves believe, assert or judge.

This clarification leads to the second point, which is that what is at issue is content-judging (-believing, -asserting) *abilities*. Claims which are merely about the *logical forms* of attitude-ascriptive contents do not on their own have implications concerning these abilities. An account of the logical form of some content c tells you what *logical* relations c stands in to other contents: it tells you which contents must be true if c is true, and which contents are such that their truth guarantees that of c. The relation that presently concerns me, however, does not supervene on truth-conditional relations. The truth of the axioms of arithmetic provably guarantees the truth of the claim that arithmetic is incomplete. But it does not follow that those who are able to judge the former are able to judge the latter; they might lack the requisite concepts. Moreover, there are some contents so complex that we, with our minds, cannot entertain them; nevertheless they stand in logical relations to contents that we can entertain. The upshot of this is that if some account of attitude-ascriptive thoughts conflicts with the claim on which I have based my proposal, this cannot be due solely to what that account says about the *logical forms* of ascriptive contents. It must be due, at least partly, to what it says about content-judging *abilities*. On, then, to the accounts.

The paratactic account

Above (§II.3) I considered the paratactic account of *de dicto* content-specifying contents, and asked whether on that account, asserting (or judging or believing) *that John believes that Klaus is a Boche* requires possessing Boche; I argued that it does. One might think that my reasoning also shows that it requires being able to use this concept *directly*, to form such

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[18] Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 127, addresses the claim by arguing that we *should* think of concepts as 'embodying' substantial (thus possibly false) commitments about how the world is. Paul Boghossian, in 'Blind Reasoning', rejects the claim, arguing that while it seems to give the right result for 'tonk' (see A.N. Prior, 'The Runabout Inference-Ticket', *Analysis*, 21 (1960), pp. 38–9), it gives the wrong result for 'Boche'.

judgements as *that Klaus is a Boche.* For the paratactic account requires one to 'make oneself a samesayer' with John by producing a token that samesays 'Klaus is a Boche'; and what is it to do this, if not to use BOCHE directly?

The error in this reasoning is of the same sort as the error I pointed out in that section, *viz* neglect of the performative side of the paratactic account. It is not required on the paratactic account that the demonstrated token be produced in the mode of assertion, judgement or belief. It could be produced, as Davidson himself emphasized, in the mode of play. So the requirement that some such item must be produced generates no conflict with my claim that in some cases the content-specifying judgement can be made by speakers unable to make the judgement they are specifying.

It is worth noting here that Brandom offers a variant of Davidson's view of content-specifying discourse. The major difference is that he drops Davidson's claim that the word 'that' is a demonstrative. For Brandom (*Making It Explicit*, p. 538), when I say that Galileo said that the earth moves, I say something that has 'the sense of'

> Galileo said (something that *in his mouth then* committed him to what an assertional utterance of this *in my mouth now* would commit me to): the earth moves.

From the point of view of the IR theorist who concedes the intuitively plausible claims on which Williamson bases his objection, this is an unfortunate elaboration of Davidson's view. For unlike Davidson's, it requires the utterance produced for the purpose of samesaying to be *assertable* by the speaker. (Perhaps accommodation can be achieved by taking 'would' loosely, so that the truth of 'would commit me to' follows from that of 'would commit me to, if I did not reject the relation between the circumstances and consequences of such a commitment'.)

Unstructured propositional accounts

Another view of content-specifying thoughts was expressed by Jaakko Hintikka: 'an attribution of any propositional attitude ... involves a division of all the possible worlds ... into those possible worlds which are in accordance with the attitude in question and into those which are incompatible with it'.[19] Views of this sort appear to underwrite an inference from X's being able to judge or believe *that Y believes that p* to X's being able to judge or believe *that p*, since X's doing the latter involves drawing the same distinction among possible worlds as doing the former involves.

[19] J. Hintikka, 'Semantics for Propositional Attitudes', in J.W. Davis *et al.* (eds), *Philosophical Logic* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), pp. 21–45, repr. in L. Linsky (ed.), *Reference and Modality* (Oxford UP, 1971), pp. 145–67, at p. 150.

A recent proponent of this approach has argued for a substantial modification to the basic idea, however, and on this modified view the inference does not go through. In his 'Belief Attribution and Context' Robert Stalnaker examines the phenomenon of context-dependence, working with a conception of propositions as functions from possible worlds to truth-values.[20] Assertions of a sentence on different occasions can express different propositions; in Stalnaker's framework this is because context determines 'the domain of possible worlds that propositions distinguish between' – a 'context set' (*Context and Content*, p. 156). Things are more complicated when one sentence is embedded within another, as in conditionals or belief ascriptions. When embedded, a sentence expresses a proposition which distinguishes not among worlds in the context set but among worlds in the 'derived' context set, which 'may be different, often disjoint, from the basic context [set]' (pp. 156–7). In the case of a conversation about what Phoebe believes, for example, the derived context set is 'the set of all possible situations that might, for all the *speaker* presupposes, be compatible with Phoebe's beliefs' (p. 157). This framework can be applied straightforwardly to the ascription of a belief involving a concept the speaker rejects. If the speaker presupposes that Phoebe accepts the B rules, then the derived context includes only worlds in which the B rules are truth-preserving (that is, ones in which all Germans are cruel). None of these worlds accords with the presuppositions of a speaker who rejects those rules. Thus a speaker can ascribe a belief whose content partitions a set of worlds without being able to believe or assert a content effecting the same partition (since the sets being partitioned are disjoint). On Stalnaker's view, then, from X's being able to ascribe to Y a belief that p it does not follow that X can judge, believe or assert that p. The possible-worlds approach to attitude ascription, at least as elaborated by one leading proponent, can accommodate the proposal I have made concerning the phenomenon of rejected concepts.

Fregean accounts

Frege's view of *de dicto* ascriptions was that when embedded in a 'that'-clause, a declarative sentence has its sense – a Thought – as its reference.[21] A Thought, for Frege, is a way of thinking of a truth-value, and these ways are extremely fine-grained, since they satisfy what Gareth Evans called the 'intuitive criterion of difference', that two sentences express different

[20] R. Stalnaker, 'Belief Attribution and Context', in R.H. Grimm and D.D. Merrill (eds), *Contents of Thought* (Arizona UP, 1988), pp. 140–56, repr. in his *Context and Content* (Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 150–66.
[21] Frege, 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 100 (1892), pp. 25–50, tr. as 'On Sense and Meaning', in P.T. Geach and M. Black (eds), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), pp. 56–78.

Thoughts if it is possible for someone who understands both to assent to only one.[22] To the former Fregean commitment, the first of the general points I made at the start of this section applies: we should put it aside, since it supports an objection to the IR theorists' view which is very different from the one which is my topic. (Someone who holds that to judge *that X believes that p* is to specify a way in which *X* thinks of a truth-value must hold that *no* concept is governed by the B rules.[23]) What is entailed by the remainder of Frege's account? Must the Fregean maintain that being able to use a sentence embedded in a *de dicto* attitude ascription, in order to specify a fine-grained Thought which is the content of some judgement, assertion or belief, entails being able to judge, assert or believe that very Thought?

It would be awkward for the Fregean to insist that it always does. Take the case of 'I'-thoughts. In accordance with the criterion of difference, Frege maintained that each of us is 'presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else', so that when Dr Lauben thinks of himself in this way, his thoughts are ones that 'only Dr Lauben himself can grasp'.[24] So in order to maintain that being able to *ascribe* means being able to *judge* (etc.), the Fregean must maintain that no one else can even *ascribe* these thoughts to Dr Lauben. But this is implausible; moreover, it follows from no core Fregean principle.[25]

So it appears there can be a Fregean view on which it is possible to ascribe *de dicto* Thoughts one cannot oneself have; thus there is no deep conflict between my proposal and the Fregean view *of attitude ascription*.

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[22] G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford UP, 1982), p. 19.

[23] Dummett appears to take this position, writing that meanings are governed by a 'requirement of harmony' between the conditions in which an assertion may be appropriately made and the consequences of its being made (*Frege: Philosophy of Language*, pp. 396–7). Similarly Peacocke, as I noted above (fn. 3), would count 'Boche' as expressing a 'spurious' concept. This is because on his view, 'Judgement aims at truth. So we need to show how judging in conformity with the normative links [for a concept] is consistent with aiming at truth' (*A Study of Concepts*, p. 133). While this is not an argument Frege explicitly makes, its consonance with the first of his commitments concerning Thoughts is evident.

[24] Frege, 'The Thought: a Logical Inquiry', *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, 1 (1919), pp. 58–77, tr. A. and M. Quinton, *Mind*, 65 (1956), pp. 289–311, at p. 298.

[25] To maintain it, one would have to argue against the account offered by Hector-Neri Castañeda of how a person's 'I'-thoughts can be ascribed *de dicto* by others using 'the *quasi-indicator* corresponding to the first person [pronoun]' (marked colloquially in English as 'he himself'): see H.-N. Castañeda, 'Indicators and Quasi-Indicators', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 4 (1967), pp. 85–100, and 'On the Logic of Attributions of Self-Knowledge to Others', *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), pp. 439–56, at p. 441. There is no obstacle to a Fregean's accepting Castañeda's account, since it conflicts neither with the core of Frege's conception of Thoughts (that they are ways of thinking of truth-values, and that they obey the criterion of difference) nor with the core of his conception of *de dicto* attitude ascriptions (that when embedded in a 'that'-clause, a sentence has a fine-grained Thought as its reference).

Russellian (structured propositional) accounts

On a Russellian account, an assertion of 'Phoebe believes that fleas have wings' is true if and only if Phoebe stands in the relation picked out by 'believes' to a complex entity, components of which are picked out by components of 'fleas have wings'.[26] Just in virtue of making the assertion, furthermore, the speaker stands in the asserting relation to a complex whose components are picked out by components of 'Phoebe believes that fleas have wings'. The relation among these two complexes is that the 'Fleas have wings' complex is a *part* of the 'Phoebe believes that fleas have wings' complex. Thus 'fleas' picks out the *same* component, whether it occurs as part of 'Fleas have wings' or as part of 'Phoebe believes that fleas have wings': we have 'semantic innocence' (in Davidson's sense).

What should the Russellian say of 'Boche' and the like? There are two options. On Russellian views the proposition-component that corresponds to a predicate is a property. Since there is no property which makes the B rules truth-preserving (when 'Boche' is interpreted as expressing that property), the Russellian must hold that corresponding to 'Boche' there is either a property which does *not* make the B rules truth-preserving, or there is no property at all. The first option conflicts with the IR theorists' claim that accepting the B rules is necessary for using 'Boche' to express one's thoughts. For what claim could the B rules have to this status if they are not truth-preserving when 'Boche' is interpreted as it should be (on this option)? This objection may be put aside, though, since it differs from the one that concerns me here. (It is an objection of the sort I discussed above, one based on a theoretical claim about the nature of concepts.) On the second option, there is *no* property 'Boche' picks out. This commits the Russellian to saying that it is not possible to believe *that the man living next door is a Boche*, there being no suitable complex to be believed. For the same reason, it also commits the Russellian to saying, more pertinently here, that it is not possible to believe *that Susan believes that the man living next door is a Boche*. So the Russellian who takes this option will say that Williamson's objection concedes too much to IR theorists, since it starts with the idea that racists *do* express thoughts using 'Boche', and that a non-racist can understand their assertions. As concerns 'Boche', then, the Russellian will either mount an objection to the IR theorists' views which differs from the objection I am now concerned with, or will object to one of the presuppositions of that

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[26] Prominent Russellian accounts include M. Richard, 'Direct Reference and Ascriptions of Belief', *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 12 (1983), pp. 426–52; N. Salmon, *Frege's Puzzle* (MIT Press, 1986); S. Soames, 'Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content', *Philosophical Topics*, 15 (1987), pp. 47–87.

objection. Either way, for present purposes I can bracket this aspect of Russellian views.

Returning then to the question of whether the Russellian view *of attitude ascription* conflicts with the proposal I have made, the much debated Russellian implication concerning attitude ascriptions is that any two differing solely in the replacement of one expression (in the 'that'-clause) by another which picks out the same component of the proposition – e.g., two proper names of the same person – necessarily have the same truth-condition. (This follows from the Russellian claim about content-ascriptive contents, since any two such expressions pick out the same component of the complex that is the content.) This implication, important though it is, does not bear on my question. The reason is that the difference which concerns me is not of this sort: no such replacement takes you from a content-specifying content to one that is not content-specifying.[27] *My* question is whether on the Russellian view John's being able to *ascribe* a *c*-thought entails his being able to *have* (at least some) *c*-thoughts. Put in Russellian terms, the question is whether being able to stand in the judging relation to the 'Phoebe believes that fleas have wings' complex, say, entails being able to stand in the judging relation to some *non-content-specifying* 'fleas' complexes. A Russellian who can advance some such principle about judgeability (and similarly for the other attitudes) can object to my proposal not on the ground that it conflicts with the Russellian theory of content, but on the ground that it conflicts with this general claim about the relations between abilities to have direct and content-specifying thoughts involving the same concept.

Does the Russellian view support such a principle about judgeability? It would do so if it entailed that being able to judge some complex *c* means being able to judge *any sub-complex* of *c*. But no Russellian would say that each sub-complex of a judgeable complex is itself judgeable. (One sub-complex of the 'Fleas have wings' complex is the 'has wings' complex; yet this is not a judgeable complex.) This highlights the fact that whether the Russellian view supports such a judgeability principle depends, as we should expect, on the Russellian view of *judgeability* rather than on a claim about the nature of attitude ascription. So a Russellian view, if inconsistent with my

[27] It is worth noting that Russell's claims about acquaintance do not generate a conflict either. He famously claimed that acquaintance with its components is a *necessary* condition for being able to stand in the judging relation to some complex *c*; this does not entail that it is a *sufficient* condition of *c*'s being a complex to which somebody can stand in the judging relation: see Russell, 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 11 (1911), pp. 108–28. (Incidentally, in the light of an issue raised below (§V.3) it is worth noting that Russell (p. 109) writes, using 'aware of' for acquaintance, 'Whether it is possible to be aware of a complex without being aware of its constituents is not an easy question, but on the whole it would seem that there is no reason why it should not be possible'. This is a denial that acquaintance is 'reverse compositional'.)

proposal, has to engage it on its own ground, by relying on claims about judgeability rather than claims about the nature of attitude ascription.

It would be too much to try to survey all theories of attitude ascription that have been given, asking of each whether it conflicts with the proposal I have made. In this section I have explained why in my view there is no conflict between any of the major views and my proposal's core commitment, namely, that one can ascribe *de dicto* a thought one cannot oneself have.

IV.3. *Relation to Williamson's claims*

There is nothing distinctively inferentialist about the claim that the conditions for using a concept in a content-specifying way are weaker than those for using it directly. Indeed, that claim is compatible with the view of concept-possession which Williamson himself sketches. He says that his argument rests on the claim that understanding a word suffices for possessing the concept it expresses, and that the problems he sees with the inferentialist claims about Boche and other concepts are due to 'the nature of language as a medium of communication between individuals who disagree with each other in indefinitely various ways' ('Understanding and Inference', p. 290). In these terms, my proposal can be expressed as the claim that *greater* disagreement is possible among thinkers who use a concept in a content-specifying way than is possible among thinkers who use it directly. There is nothing distinctively inferentialist about this claim, nor is there anything in it that conflicts with Williamson's claims about word-understanding (either in 'Understanding and Inference' or in 'Conceptual Truth'). Thus there is in the effort to accommodate the inferentialists' intuitions about the B rules nothing at odds with the conception of concept-possession which Williamson sees as supporting his claims.

Of course, there are other ways to try to accommodate the intuitions my proposal is meant to accommodate. Although Williamson denies the IR theorists' intuition that a non-racist cannot have thoughts of the form '*x* is a Boche', he does offer an explanation of why that might *seem* impossible. His suggestion is that the appearance is due to a conventional implicature: the reason why he himself does not, for instance, assert such things as 'Lessing was Boche' is that to do so 'would be to *imply* that Germans are cruel, and I do not want to imply that' ('Understanding and Inference', p. 263). There are a couple of problems with this proposal. One is that it is difficult to see how the notion of conventional implicature is to apply to thoughts and beliefs. Why could I not silently think to myself that my German neighbour is a Boche? It cannot be because to do so would be to imply to *myself* something I do not believe. Another problem is that Williamson's move invites

the objection that all it amounts to is a relabelling, as 'conventional implicature', of those aspects of inferential role that support claim (B).

We need not try awkwardly to explain away or relabel intuitions which we can simply accept; and neither Williamson's argument nor his claim about conventional implicature give anyone who shares the IR theorists' basic intuition, that accepting the B rules is a necessary condition for having thoughts of the form '*x* is a Boche', a reason to reject it. Far more attractive is a conciliatory proposal which accommodates both the IR theorists' intuitions supporting (B) and Williamson's intuitions supporting the denial of (C). The work, now, is to show that this proposal is not only supported by arguments but survives objections. For there are several reasons why one might think that denying (C) requires denying (B) as well.

V. OBJECTIONS TO THE PROPOSAL

Despite its support from the intuitions adduced on both sides of the debate over rejected concepts, and its compatibility with a range of views on the nature of attitude ascription and with Williamson's view of concept-possession, there are nevertheless several objections which my proposal invites. They mostly involve plausible-sounding general principles about concept possession. Some such principles are truistic, and the proposal is compatible with them. Those that are not truistic, but are incompatible with the proposal, are on closer examination implausible. On balance, the philosopher who shares the intuitions advanced on *both* sides of the debate over inferential-role accounts of rejected concepts has more reason to deny such sweeping principles than to endorse them.

V.1. *Interaction effects*

One worry about the proposal is that it neglects the possibility of interaction effects such as those discussed above (§III.1), which might coincide to make it the case that the ability to judge contents of the form '*X* believes that *Y* is a Boche' *does* require the ability to judge contents of the form '*X* is a Boche'. A look at the natural proposals, however, shows how the interactions fail – which is what one should expect, given the existence of intuitive counter-examples to (C) which are not counter-examples to (B).

One thought is that there might be interaction effects with an inference rule constitutive for possessing the concept TRUE. Might possession of this concept somehow require a non-racist to judge BOCHE contents of the form directly governed by the B rules? The worry here concerns inferences such as the following:

Gerald said that Klaus is a Boche
What Gerald said is true

Klaus is a Boche

Inferences such as this are of course unobjectionable to a thinker who accepts the concept BOCHE. But a thinker who rejects this concept, and endorses the first premise, denies the second. (The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for FALSE.) Hence the ability to judge the first premise does not require the ability to judge the conclusion, even for a thinker who possesses the concept TRUE; so the conditions necessary for doing the latter do not kick in as conditions necessary for doing the former.

What about a form of inference acceptance of which is required to possess the concept BELIEVES? One could maintain that possessing the concept of belief requires taking beliefs to be essentially truth-valued, which would mean accepting inferences of the following form:

X believes that p
---
p or not-p

If this were right, then anyone able to use the concepts in p in a content-specifying way could also use them directly. But the idea that this inference rule is constitutive for BELIEVES is a non-starter for anyone who shares the IR theorists' intuitions about the B rules and Williamson's intuitions about understanding. For while understanding a content suffices for ascribing beliefs with that content (as in the premise), rejecting a concept, on the IR view, entails that some contents in which it occurs are such that one should endorse neither them nor their negations. On such a view the proposed rule cannot be constitutive for BELIEVES. (Of course, there is a weaker claim with which the view is consistent, *that all those who can judge both the premise and the conclusion* are committed to such inferences.) Indeed, a stronger conclusion follows. Since these IR theorists themselves possess the concept BELIEVES, *their* rejection of the proposed inference rule is enough to show that it *really is not* possession-constitutive for that concept, not just that they think it is not.

Another thought might be that possessing the concept BELIEVES requires accepting inferences of the following form:

I believe that p
---
p

If this were true, then again being able to use the concepts in p in a content-specifying way would require being able to use them directly. But it is highly dubious that endorsing inferences of this sort is part of what possessing BELIEVES requires. One has to be careful here to distinguish the claim that

people endorse such inferences from the claim that when they believe their premises, they also believe their conclusions. Granted, if I believe *that I believe that John swam across the lake*, then I believe *that John swam across the lake*. But this does not mean that I endorse an inference from the former belief to the latter. Only those who think that their believing something always ensures its truth could endorse such a form of inference. Most of us are not that confident; nevertheless we do possess the concept BELIEVES. So endorsing every inference of this form is not a necessary condition for possessing this concept.

(Perhaps there are some inferences of this form that are plausibly possession-constitutive, for instance

> I believe that I believe that *p*
> _____
> I believe that *p*

In such cases, however, the concepts in *p* are being used in a content-specifying way both in premise and conclusion; so they lend no support to the claim that being able to use the concepts in *p* in a content-specifying way requires being able to use them directly.)

Considerations about interactions among possession-constitutive inference rules, then, provide no reason to think that one must be able to use a concept directly in order to be able to use it in a content-specifying way. So they provide no reason to infer the falsity of (B) from Williamson's refutation of (C).

V.2. *Thinking a thought involves thinking its parts*

One might maintain that thinking a thought involves thinking its parts, and that the content *that Klaus is a Boche* is a part of the content *that Gerald believes that Klaus is a Boche*. From these two claims it seems to follow that anyone who can judge or believe the latter content can judge or believe the former, contrary to the proposal I have made for reconciling the intuitions on each side of the debate over rejected concepts. In considering this objection, I simply grant the second claim; the problem is with the first. It admits of a truistic and a substantive reading. On the truistic reading it is consistent with the proposal; on the substantive reading, it is clearly false.

The truistic idea which the claim might be taken to express is this. Thinking each conceptual component (*viz* concept or combination of concepts) of a content is *part of what happens* while one thinks that content. In this sense of 'thinks', it is true that in thinking the content GERALD BELIEVES THAT KLAUS IS A BOCHE, one thinks the component KLAUS IS A BOCHE. But in this sense of 'thinks', it is *also* true that one thinks the component BELIEVES and that one thinks the component BOCHE. They are not judgeable or believable

contents, though – only fragments. So in the sense of 'thinking' for which it is trivially true (if indeed contents do have parts) that thinking a complex thought involves thinking its parts, not all things one can think are things one can believe or judge. It follows that it is consistent with my proposal to say, in this sense of 'think', that people who can think the content GERALD BELIEVES THAT KLAUS IS A BOCHE can think the content KLAUS IS A BOCHE. For saying this does not entail that the latter is something they can *believe* or *judge* – or even (in just the same sense of 'think') think *on its own*.

The substantive reading of the claim is one on which thinking the parts of a content is *not* something which simply occurs as part of thinking that content. What 'thinks' comes to on this reading is something more like 'judges' or 'commits oneself to'. In this sense it is obviously not the case that thinking a thought involves thinking its components: judging that not-*p* does not involve judging that *p*.

On neither its truistic nor its substantive reading, then, is the claim that 'thinking a thought involves thinking its parts' a problem for my proposal.

V.3. *Reverse compositionality*

In a similar vein one could object that the proposal I have made conflicts with a claim which has struck at least one leading philosopher as so obvious that any view which conflicts with it is thereby refuted. This is the claim that concept possession exhibits what Fodor and Lepore call 'reverse compositionality': that possessing a complex concept requires possessing each of its component concepts.[28] Here is Fodor, insisting on this in an earlier paper:

> Suppose a primitive concept has a possession condition which is not inherited by one of its complex hosts.... Then it is presumably possible that someone who has the concept PET FISH should none the less not have the concept PET. I take this to be a *reductio*, and I think that you should too.[29]

(In a later paper Fodor and Lepore argue that meanings too are reverse compositional: 'The meaning of "dogs" and "bark" must be contained in the meaning of "dogs bark" because people who understand the sentence likewise understand the words' ('Why Compositionality Won't Go Away', p. 366).) Since I am committed to the possibility of a thinker's being able to judge or believe *that Gerald thinks that Klaus is a Boche* while *not* being able to judge or believe a content which is a component of it (namely, the content *that Klaus is a Boche*), I must deny that concept possession is reverse compositional. How plausible is it to deny that?

[28] Fodor and Lepore, 'Why Compositionality Won't Go Away: Reflections on Horwich', *Ratio*, 14 (2001), pp. 350–68.

[29] Fodor, 'There Are No Recognitional Concepts; Not Even RED', *Philosophical Issues*, 9 (1998), pp. 1–14.

Quite plausible. Several recent commentators have argued that reverse compositionality is not a feature of concept possession, word-understanding or linguistic meanings. Doug Patterson argues that one can possess the concept KEY LIME PIE without possessing the concept KEY LIME: one can understand the phrase without understanding the subphrase, and can have attitudes toward the property the phrase picks out without being able to have attitudes toward the property the subphrase picks out; and 'There is simply nothing left over for the difference between having a concept and lacking it to explain when all of this is admitted'.[30] Kent Johnson, focusing on word-understanding, argues that one can understand 'Mary was building the house' without understanding 'build': understanding 'build' requires knowing that it is a telic verb (unlike 'watch'), but understanding the sentence does not require this, for the sentence 'doesn't indicate which of the multiple possible sorts of constituents it is built out of', i.e., whether it is built out of 'build' or a possible atelic cousin.[31] Philip Robbins argues that 'no standard theory [of meanings] is reverse compositional as it stands, but every one can be made reverse compositional by means of the same technical device' – the latter point casting doubt on the explanatory impact of reverse compositionality even if it *were* a feature of any standard theory of meanings.[32] So it appears to these philosophers at least that there are clear counter-examples to reverse compositionality. What of the arguments for it? Fodor presents his main learnability-based argument most fully in his *In Critical Condition*.[33] This argument has left commentators unconvinced. The learnability of language is fully explained, they hold, by the (generally acknowledged) *forward* compositionality of meanings.[34]

Is there any reason for IR theorists in particular to agree that concept possession must be reverse compositional? I cannot see that there is. What drives Johnson's example is the fact that not every feature of 'build' that makes a difference to the understandability of *some* phrases in which it occurs makes a difference to the understandability of *every* phrase in which it occurs. The corresponding claim about inferential possession-conditions is that not every inference that is possession-constitutive for *some* contents in which a concept occurs is possession-constitutive for *every* content in which it

[30] D. Patterson, 'Learnability and Compositionality', *Mind & Language*, 20 (2005), pp. 326–52, at p. 349.

[31] K. Johnson, 'On the Nature of Reverse Compositionality', *Erkenntnis*, 64 (2006), pp. 37–60, at pp. 41–5.

[32] P. Robbins, 'The Myth of Reverse Compositionality', *Philosophical Studies*, 125 (2005), pp. 251–75, at p. 269.

[33] Fodor, 'There Are No Recognitional Concepts; Not Even RED, Part 2: the Plot Thickens', in his *In Critical Condition* (MIT Press, 1998), pp. 49–62.

[34] Patterson, 'Learnability and Compositionality', §§5–6; Robbins, 'The Myth of Reverse Compositionality', §1.4; Johnson, 'On the Nature of Reverse Compositionality', §3.

occurs. I have already said that this is so: in §III.1 I noted that inference rules specify inferences according to their forms, so a content in which some concept occurs may be of a form not specified in a rule which is possession-constitutive for that concept's occurrence in contents of other forms.

V.4. *Recombinability*

Someone might agree that complex concepts are not related to their simple components as reverse compositionality would require, while still wondering whether there is a relation *among complexes* that makes trouble for the proposal. Here is a possible principle:

R. If one can have some c-thoughts of some form F_1, then for any form F_2: if one can have some thoughts of form F_2, one can have some c-thoughts of form F_2.

This is not precisely expressed, but refinements would not be fruitful in the present context. (One problem is that F_2 could be a form to which the concept c is not suited – say, it involves only one-place predicates and c is a relational concept. A deeper problem is that I have not said what notion of form is involved. In the present context it is enough to assume that there is a notion of form according to which contents such as *that John is a Boche* and *that Susan said that John is a Boche* are of different forms.)

Conjoining (4) with (R) generates a conflict with (B). Suppose Susan instantiates (4). She does not follow the B rules but can have Boche thoughts none the less. Of *whatever* form those Boche thoughts are, (R) says that she can have Boche thoughts of the form 'x is a Boche' (since she can have some thoughts of the form 'x is an F'); so she is a counter-example to (B). So if (R) is true, the IR theorist cannot avoid Williamson's argument in the way I have proposed.

What arguments are there in support of (R)? (We should not go by its initial plausibility, which did little good for reverse compositionality.) One thought might be that if (R) is false then our conceptual abilities are an unsystematic shambles. Not so. (R) is a vastly sweeping principle, which says more than just that there is systematicity among all thoughts of the same form. It says that there is systematicity straddling all differences in form among the thoughts in a thinker's repertoire. This distinguishes it from Evans' generality constraint (*The Varieties of Reference*, p. 104), for example, which concerns only atomic thoughts. The truth of Evans' principle is consistent with the falsity of (R), since none of the thoughts which his principle concerns involves content-specifying uses of a concept. There are many true principles which are less sweeping than (R); perhaps Evans' is one of them.

(Peacocke endorses Evans' generality constraint on the basis of an argument which actually has a much stronger conclusion: if sound, it establishes (R) too. His premise is that any thinker employing a concept in *any* thought 'knows what it is for an arbitrary object to fall under' that concept (*A Study of Concepts*, p. 43). From this it follows that a thinker able to entertain the thought that F*a*, and able to entertain the thought G*b*, is able to entertain the thoughts F*b* and G*a* (which proves Evans' constraint). (R) follows as well, however, since the premise involves no distinction of thoughts into different forms: whatever consequences it has for the thought *that Fa* it also has for the thought *that Tom believes that Fa*. But this means that the premise simply *presupposes* (R); there is nothing here to counter the intuitions offered on both sides of the debate, which taken together imply that (R) is false.)

VI. CONCLUSION

There is remarkably little standing in the way of a simple, intuitively plausible solution to this particular debate over inferential-role accounts of concept possession. This should not be surprising. All I have done, really, is to point out an instance of the general fact that you can often understand what is involved in doing something you cannot do yourself. I understand what it is to water-ski, but I cannot do it. The special twist when it comes to concepts is that understanding what it is to use a concept in one way – directly – is all it takes to be able to use it in a content-specifying way. This may sound odd if we use 'possession' in both cases: it becomes the claim that knowing what it is to possess a concept is all it takes to possess it. But this is just a reason not to speak of 'possession' as if it were an all-or-nothing matter. (Granted, the word encourages this, which is a reason not to use it here.) It is not a reason to deny that *understanding* direct uses of a concept is all it takes to be able to use it in a content-specifying way. More is required to be able to use it directly yourself; that there is this gap explains why you can use, at least in one way, a concept you reject.[35]

University of Guelph