



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANALYSIS

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), pp. 124-128

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3328832>

Accessed: 03/11/2012 13:13

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Accepting the Consequences of Anti-individualism

MICHAEL MCKINSEY

The characteristic thesis of anti-individualism is that certain de dicto cognitive attitude predicates such as 'is thinking that water is wet' express 'wide' psychological properties – properties, that is, whose possession 'presupposes' or 'necessarily depends upon' the existence of objects that are external relative to the person to whom the properties are ascribed. In my paper 'Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access' [6], I argued that contrary to the claims of Burge [3], the characteristic thesis of anti-individualism is inconsistent with the Cartesian idea that we each have privileged access to the contents of our thoughts.

In his reply to my paper, Anthony Brueckner [1] claims that my criticism is wrong because it is based on a simple *misunderstanding* of Burge (pp. 111, 114, and 116, note 5). My argument relied on my contention that the anti-individualist's notion of 'necessary dependence' should be understood as logical, or conceptual, implication. Brueckner claims that this is wrong. The anti-individualist's notion of necessary dependence, he says, is much weaker than conceptual implication (p. 114). Brueckner's opinion was quickly seconded by Warfield [9], who claims repeatedly (pp. 232–33) that 'Brueckner has refuted McKinsey'.

Although Brueckner is unclear about what he thinks the notion of necessary dependence is supposed to be, his considered view seems to be that necessary dependence should be interpreted as *metaphysical* dependence (p. 116). But if so, then it seems that, contrary to Brueckner's claims, I did not misunderstand Burge after all. For one of the points that I was most concerned to make in my paper was that Burge's argument in [3] for the consistency of anti-individualism and privileged access tacitly (and illegitimately) identifies the anti-individualist's notion of necessary dependence with that of metaphysical dependence (see [6], pp. 12–13). Since this is an interpretation of Burge to which Brueckner himself is committed, he is wrong to claim that my main mistake was that of not understanding what Burge really had in mind. Again, an interpretation of Burge that Brueckner endorses is an interpretation that I myself took (laborious) pains to emphasize in my paper.

Moreover, by resting his whole case merely on the claim that I misunderstood Burge, Brueckner neglects the fact that I gave an *argument* for the conclusion that the anti-individualist's notion of necessary dependence should be interpreted as conceptual implication ([6], pp. 13–14). For (I argued), interpreting the notion as metaphysical dependence results in a

version of anti-individualism that is quite trivial and that most individualists would not wish to deny.

The main point of my paper can be put in the form of a dilemma that faces anti-individualists like Burge who also want to endorse privileged access. Either the anti-individualist's notion of necessary dependence is construed as metaphysical entailment or it is construed as conceptual implication. On the first alternative, the anti-individualist achieves consistency with privileged access all right, but the cost of this advantage is that anti-individualism becomes a trivial view that most individualists would gladly accept. On the second alternative, anti-individualism becomes an interesting and controversial view, but the cost of this advantage is the inconsistency of anti-individualism with privileged access. Thus anti-individualism is an interesting, non-trivial view only if it is inconsistent with privileged access.

Brueckner sees that the second horn of my dilemma leads to inconsistency with privileged access. But his reaction is just to grasp the dilemma's first horn, thus ignoring my argument that this alternative turns anti-individualism into a trivial, uninteresting view.

In the latter argument, I considered the following special case of the kind of claim that the anti-individualist marshals in favour of his general view:

- (2) The proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet necessarily depends upon E,

where the variable 'E' stands in for whatever 'external proposition' it is whose 'presupposition' is supposed (according to anti-individualism) to make Oscar's thought that water is wet a wide state. If the notion of necessary dependence in (2) is interpreted as metaphysical dependence, then (2) becomes

- (2a) The proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet metaphysically entails E.

Now in order for a claim like (2a) to be at all relevant to anti-individualism, we must interpret 'wide state' to mean 'state that metaphysically entails the existence of objects external to the person in the state'. But then, as I argued in my paper, the resulting version of (the characteristic thesis of) anti-individualism is quite trivial and uninteresting ([6], pp. 13–14).

For as I pointed out, given certain materialistic assumptions that are pretty widely held, it is plausible to believe that probably *every* psychological state (of whatever sort, de dicto or otherwise) is metaphysically dependent on the existence of external objects. Thus, on the present interpretation of 'wide state', probably every psychological state is wide, and the concept of a narrow state would have no application at all.

The consideration I used in my paper was that every human's existence metaphysically depends on the existence of that human's biological parents; but similarly, we could also consider each human's metaphysical dependence on the sperm and egg cells from which that human developed, on the existence of DNA, on the existence of complex protein molecules, and so on.¹ Clearly, given this consideration, any *human* person's being in any psychological state will metaphysically depend on the existence of physical objects external to that person. But more generally, if you are a materialist, it should seem exceedingly implausible to you that *any* being of *any* sort could possibly be in *any* psychological state, in the absence of other physical objects distinct from that being.²

Thus if the anti-individualist adopts a sense of 'wide state' according to which metaphysical entailment of external objects is sufficient for a state to be wide, then it turns out that absolutely *every* psychological state will be wide, no matter how 'narrow' that state might intuitively have appeared. This in turn has the effect of trivializing the characteristic thesis of anti-individualism. This thesis says that many de dicto ascribed thoughts, such as the thought that water is wet, are wide states. But on the metaphysical interpretation of 'wide', this thesis would say nothing about, say, the thought that water is wet that is not also true of even the most intuitively *narrow* of states, with the most intuitively *narrow* of contents, such as the thought that $2 + 2 = 4$. A thesis of this kind makes no interesting distinction among psychological states and is thus of no interest to the philosophy of mind.

Before concluding, I would like to respond to a possible objection to my 'trivialization' argument that might be suggested by some of Brueckner's remarks.

The objection goes as follows. An anti-individualist who utilizes the notion of metaphysical dependency will claim that having the thought, say, that water is wet metaphysically depends upon some *content-specific environmental condition E*. But surely, McKinsey's trivialization argument is just *irrelevant* to any such claim. It may indeed be true, say, that Oscar's thinking that water is wet metaphysically depends on the existence of Oscar's biological parents. But since the existence of Oscar's parents has nothing to do with the specific content of Oscar's thought, the anti-individualist's claim about the content of this thought has not been shown to be trivial.

This objection is simply an *ignoratio elenchi*. I did not argue for the conclusion that any *specific* anti-individualist claims about content are made trivial by adopting the notion of metaphysical dependency. Rather,

¹ This general sort of consideration is of course due to Kripke (see [5], pp. 312–314). The example of DNA is used by Heil [4], p. 166.

² See my discussion in [7], pp. 148–151.

the conclusion of my argument is that *the characteristic thesis* of anti-individualism is made trivial by adopting this notion. Again, the characteristic thesis says that many de dicto-ascribed thoughts are wide states. But if this thesis is understood in terms of metaphysical dependence, then it must mean something like 'Many de dicto ascribed thoughts metaphysically depend upon the existence of objects external to the thinker'. And it is *this* thesis that my argument shows is trivial.

Perhaps a defender of (metaphysical) anti-individualism who notes that my argument does not directly affect any specific anti-individualist claims about content might simply grant my point that the metaphysical version of the characteristic thesis is trivial, while insisting that the philosophical interest of anti-individualism lies in its specific claims about the metaphysical dependency of content upon external facts. But I fail to see how a specific claim about content could be philosophically interesting just *in itself*, apart from any support that the claim might give to at least *some* form of generalization. What, for instance, would be the intrinsic philosophical interest of the claim that one's thought that water is wet necessarily depends upon, say, the existence of H₂O? Surely, this claim is *not* interesting just in itself. Rather, it is interesting because it seems to support the denial of a general philosophical view that has been commonly assumed since Descartes, namely, the view that facts about the contents of one's thoughts are independent of any contingent facts about the external world.

My point of view is I think clearly supported by the actual practice of anti-individualists, who themselves invariably stress the philosophical significance of their specific claims about content by alluding to these claims' support of some version of the characteristic thesis. For example, in [2] Burge sums up his anti-individualist conclusion by saying, 'In some instances, an individual's having certain de dicto attitudes *entails* the existence of entities other than himself and his attitude contents' (p. 117, Burge's emphasis). Earlier in this same article, Burge (explicitly following Putnam [8]) characterizes the sense of entailment in question as *logical* entailment ([2], p. 108). But in his later attempt in [3] to reconcile anti-individualism and privileged access, Burge apparently abandons logical entailment in favour of metaphysical entailment. My point is simple: there is a serious price to pay for this way of reconciling anti-individualism and privileged access; the price is the trivialization of the anti-individualist's characteristic thesis. A further effect is that the anti-individualist's specific claims about content are themselves deprived of any philosophical significance.

References

- [1] Anthony Brueckner, 'What an Anti-Individualist Knows *A Priori*', *Analysis* 52 (1992) 111–18.
- [2] Tyler Burge, 'Other Bodies', in *Thought and Object: Essays on Intentionality*, edited by A. Woodfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- [3] Tyler Burge, 'Individualism and Self-Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988) 649–63.
- [4] John Heil, *The Nature of True Minds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- [5] Saul Kripke, 'Naming and Necessity', in *Semantics of Natural Language*, edited by D. Davidson and G. Harman (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1972) 253–355.
- [6] Michael McKinsey, 'Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access', *Analysis* 51 (1991) 9–16.
- [7] Michael McKinsey, 'The Internal Basis of Meaning', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1991) 143–69.
- [8] Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"', in his *Philosophical Papers* Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
- [9] Ted A. Warfield, 'Privileged Self-Knowledge and Externalism Are Compatible', *Analysis* 52 (1992) 232–37.