Burges anti-individualism

Clarifying the thesis

Individualism is the view that all of an individual’s representational mental kinds are constitutionally independent of any relation to a wider reality. Anti-individualism maintains that many representational mental states and events are constitutionally what they are partly by virtue of relations between the individual in those states and a wider reality. — Tyler Burge, Foundations of Mind, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 3

X is constitutively independent of Y: We can give a full story about what makes it the case that X obtains without mentioning Y.

wider reality: facts about things beyond the individual’s physical state and history and “psychological resources available to the individual” (Foundations of Mind, p. 153).

Example: Ramon has a tattoo on his arm. He lives in Berkeley and has a girlfriend who lives in El Paso, Texas.

  • The fact that Ramon has a tattoo on his arm is constitutively independent of where his girlfriend lives. It depends only on facts about Ramon as an individual.
  • But the fact that Ramon is in a long-distance relationship is constitutively dependent on where his girlfriend lives.

Burge is saying that, like the property of being in a long-distance relationship, and unlike the property of having a tattoo on your arm, the property of believing that you have arthritis is constitutively dependent on facts beyond the facts that characterize you as an individual.

Why the word “constitutively”? Because “dependent” could mean either causal or constitutive dependence. It may be that part of the causal explanation of why Ramon has a tattoo on his arm is that his girlfriend lives in El Paso. (Maybe he got the tattoo when she left, as a token of his commitment. Or maybe he got it to blend in with her Texas friends.) Presumably even an individualist could admit that an individual’s mental states depend causally on things that happen in a wider reality. What makes you an individualist is that you think that these facts are constituted entirely by facts about the individual.

Individualism as Burge understands it is not the thesis that the mental properties of an individual supervene on its physical properties (which means that the mental properties could not have been different without the physical properties having been different). A Cartesian dualist who rejects the supervenience of the mental on the physical could still be an individualist. (For more, see Foundations of Mind, p. 153.)

The argument

Warm-up exercise: Klaus says, “Ich habe ein Gift” (German “Gift” = English “poison”). How do we report what he says (and believes) in English?

  (a) Klaus says that/believes that he has a gift.
  (b) Klaus says that/believes that he has a poison.

The thought experiment: Bert and Twin-Bert are physically identical. Everything about them as individuals is the same. However, their societies are subtly different. Bert’s is like ours; “arthritis” is used to mean an inflammation of the joints. Twin-Bert’s is like ours, except that “arthritis” is applied to a whole range of rheumatoid ailments, including some that do not affect the joints.

Bert says, “I have arthritis in my thigh.” Twin-Bert says, “I have arthritis in my thigh.” We assume both are sincere, so that what they say is what they believe. How do we report their beliefs?
(c) Bert believes that he has arthritis in his thigh.

But what about Twin-Bert? Is the following true?

(d) Twin-Bert believes that he has arthritis in his thigh.

Burge says that it is not. Consider the “Gift” example above. Because “arthritis” in Twin-English does not mean arthritis, we shouldn’t use our word “arthritis” in reporting what Twin-Bert believes.

So, we have a difference in belief that depends on a difference in social factors, beyond what is true of Bert/Twin-Bert as individuals.

The upshot of these reflections is that the patient’s mental contents differ while his entire physical and nonintentional mental histories, considered in isolation from their social context, remain the same. (“Individualism and the Mental,” p. 79)

**Burge compared with Putnam**

1. Mind/language:
   - Putnam: externalism about meaning.
   - Burge: anti-individualism about the mental
   - Putnam: meanings ain’t in the head.
   - Burge: propositional attitudes ain’t in the head. More radically: the mind ain’t in the head.

2. Social vs. physical environment. In Burge’s case there need be no difference in the natural kinds of diseases. The only difference is in how people use words.

3. Scope of the result (sec. II b). Applies to all kinds of terms, not just ‘natural kind’ terms. (Remember how crucial it was in Putnam’s argument that ‘water’ be a natural kind term.) Applies to any term for which there can be incomplete understanding – even functional kind terms or color terms!

   The argument can get under way in any case where it is intuitively possible to attribute a mental state or event whose content involves a notion that the subject incompletely understands. … this possibility is the key to the thought experiment. (p. 79)

**Incomplete understanding**

It would seem naïve to think that we first attain a mastery of expressions or notions we use and then tackle the subject matters we speak and think about in using those expressions or notions. In most cases, the processes overlap. But while the subject’s understanding is still partial, we sometimes attribute mental contents in the very terms the subject has yet to master. (“Individualism,” n. 1)

- **brisket** (breast or lower chest cut of animal)
- **contract** (need not be written)
- **sofa** (excludes broad overstuffed armchairs)
- **mortgage** (need not be on a house)

You can run Burge’s thought experiment with any of these.

You can also run it in reverse, so that Bert has full understanding and Twin-Bert has partial:

“…even those propositional attitudes not infected by incomplete understanding depend for their content on social factors that are independent of the individual… For if the social environment had been appropriately different, the contents of those attitudes would have been different.” (p. 84)
Alternative reinterpretations

A two-pronged approach (sec. IIIc)

(3) **Attribute a content that just captures misconception.** “Bert believes that he has tharthritis in his thigh.” (And he does.)

(4) **Count the error as metalinguistic.** Bert’s mistake lies in thinking that ‘arthritis’ means tharthritis, or that ‘arthritis’ applies to diseases not in the joints.

Some problems for this strategy:

1. **Indeterminacy.** Why tharthritis (inflammation of joints or thigh), not larthritis (inflammation of joints or limbs), or rhitics (inflammation)? What’s in Bert’s head massively underdetermines the content, and we’re barring ourselves from appealing to expert usage or linguistic convention.

2. **What do we gain** by doing this? what explanatory power do we gain by saying that Bert thinks he has tharthritis in his leg, as opposed to saying that Bert thinks he has arthritis in his leg?

3. **Shared attitudes.** We want to say that Bert shares beliefs with others who lack his misconception (e.g. his doctor). But we can’t if we reinterpret. We have to say that *none* of Bert’s beliefs he’d express using ‘arthritis’ – even simple ones like “Uncle Harry has arthritis” or “arthritis is a disease” – are shared by the doctor.

4. **Correction.** This proposal doesn’t accord with what people actually do when corrected. “You can’t have arthritis in your thigh. Arthritis is a disease of the joints.” People won’t say, “Well, then, we must be using ‘arthritis’ differently, but our disagreement is only about names.” They’ll say, “Oh, I guess I was wrong.” They’ll say, “I learned something about arthritis,” not (just) “I learned something about what is meant by ‘arthritis’!”