Social anti-individualism, co-cognitivism and second person authority

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1. Introduction
This paper explores some ramifications of social anti-individualism about thought content, firstly its relations with simulation theory and secondly its implications for knowledge of other minds. The earlier sections argue that simulation theory, at least in its co-cognitive version, provides support for anti-individualism and that taking a co-cognitive perspective may provide diagnosis and cure for some of the uneasiness which anti-individualism arouses. The final two sections of the paper pursue the suggestion that anti-individualism, against the background of a broadly Wittgensteinian account of self-knowledge, motivates the idea that there may be such a thing as second person authority as well as first person authority. You may be able to speak authoritatively about what I think because your judgement may have a role which is constitutive, and not merely causal, in determining the content of my thought.

This last idea can, I hope, be revealed as less bizarre than it may appear at first sight. What is proposed is not an exciting new answer to sceptical worries about other minds, still less a claim about how all knowledge of others’ thoughts is arrived at. Rather it is a recommendation to look again at familiar exchanges and to see them in a new light. An example of the shape of exchange to be considered is this:

A: What do you think about X?
B: I think so-and-so.
A: Ah. So you think such-and-such.
B: Hm – do I? Oh well. (Or: Oh really? Or: I suppose I do. Or: If you say so.)

What is going on, or may be going on, in cases like this? The suggestion is that A’s pronouncement and B’s acquiescence can be manifestations of A’s possession of a distinctive route to knowledge of B’s thoughts, grounded in the social nature of concepts.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 sketches the co-cognitive version of simulation theory. Section 3 outlines social anti-individualism. Section 4 considers their relations and how co-cognitivism may help to allay uneasiness about anti-individualism. Section 5 offers a brief sketch of broadly Wittgensteinian view of self-knowledge. And finally Section 6 explores the possible route to knowledge of other minds which is opened up by this in conjunction with social anti-individualism.

1 Thanks to participants at the 2010 Southampton conference on ‘Self and others in Wittgenstein and contemporary analytic philosophy’, organized by Denis McManus and Daniel Whiting, for helpful comments on an earlier presentation of these ideas. I am also grateful to Anita Avramides for the phrase ‘second person authority’.

2 Goldman, Gordon and Heal were among the earliest proponents of simulationism and the collection by Davies and Stone (1995) collects some of the initial papers by them and others. The 2009 SEP entry by Gordon provides a useful overview of the debate and a bibliography of much further work. See also Goldman (2006) for useful recent discussion. The so-called ‘co-cognitive’ version of simulationism is elaborated by Heal (2003). Burge argued for social anti-individualism in ‘Individualism and the Mental’ (1979). The paper is republished, together with a Postscript, in his Foundations of Mind (2007). References below are to this reprinting.
The role of psychological concepts

Human beings are social primates, living in families and other larger groups. Our young when born are helpless and go through years of dependency, during which they learn language together with many other skills. We are naturally cultural, both in that we have evolved with the need and capacity to learn skills from our con-specifics and also in that many of these skills concern how to engage in co-operative social activities.

Co-operative activity by a group of social animals can be developed and enriched if those animals are able to pool their cognitive resources. As far as information is concerned, pooling can occur if one individual is able to express his or her awareness of the world in some performance which makes the content of that awareness available to others. Extended pooling, not just of information but also of skills of thought development, can take place if a group of interacting individuals are able to establish an agreed topic (what to do about X, what is the case about Y) and share with each other the results of their reflections on it. Ability to engage in linguistic exchange is plausibly seen as part of a repertoire, including also production of facial expression or bodily posture and gesture, which has as one of its roles enabling such extended pooling of cognitive resources. Many of the things in which we find value (elaborate meals and personal adornments; family ties and festivals; ingenious tools and machines; arenas for showing off strength and gaining power; the arts such as poetry, painting, music and theatre; intellectual discovery; forms of political co-operation) exist only in a context of ongoing co-operative activity, in which shared goals and views are arrived at, modified and adjusted, through joint, language-mediated, cognitive activity.

To contribute to human life in the way sketched the language used need not include any psychological vocabulary. It may be wholly about the world and action in it. (‘There is not enough food here for the autumn feast’, ‘Further that way may be better’, ‘Let’s move on then’, ‘But the river is often hard to cross’, etc.) But as social life gets more complicated there is the likelihood that sub-groups of the whole group will be engaged in different projects. Questions will then arise about whom to include in which sub-group and what weight to give to various offered contributions to debate. To resolve these questions what is needed is ability to take account appropriately of the differing interests, sources of information, and cognitive strengths of the members of the group. (‘You were near the river yesterday. Did you see how deep it is?’, ‘Who is good at thinking up ways of building bridges?’, etc.)

Much analytic philosophy of mind of recent decades proceeds as if the role of psychological concepts is the same as the role of concepts in physics, chemistry, geology, botany and the like, namely that of enabling us to formulate and develop ideas about the structures and causal forces determining the behaviour of distinctive parts of the world around us, thereby allowing us to understand and explain, and perhaps also to predict and control, those parts of the world. Thus coming to grasp and use psychological concepts is conceived as mastering some theory about the structures and forces which make human bodies behave as they do, thereby enabling individuals to understand, explain, predict and control the behaviour of those bodies.

To proceed this way in philosophy of mind is to take for granted the truth of so-called ‘theory-theory’ about what is involved in grasp and use of psychological concepts. But the reminders about human life assembled earlier in this section reveal the attraction of the alternative, so-called ‘simulation theory’, which suggests instead that grasp and use psychological concepts involves recreating the thoughts of others and developing that recreation in some fruitful way. In what follows I shall suggest
that what it makes plausible is the co-cognitive version of that view. Co-cognitivism proposes that the role which shapes the logical and epistemological character of psychological concepts is that of providing ways of characterising other persons and supporting interaction with them, as potential co-thinkers and co-operators.  

We may spell out the idea a little more fully as follows. One person, to relate to another as a potential co-thinker and co-operator, needs to be able to entertain a representation of the world, as being thus or so and/or as containing such and such opportunities or threats, while at the same time appreciating that it is the stance of a centre of agency other than him or herself which is thus appreciated. Fruitful development of that appreciation requires the exercise of various skills, similar to the skills a person has in developing his or her own thought, but modified by awareness that it is another’s thought which is entertained. For example it involves picking up on whether one’s own ideas complement or conflict with the other’s, being sensitive to where and whose ideas are muddled or poorly supported, knowing how and when to invite or offer clarification, appreciating where aims are shared and where they diverge and may need adjustment, and the like. Exercising these skills in the context of interacting with others is what responding appropriately to them as thinkers amounts to. Psychological vocabulary is the vocabulary we develop when our engagement in such interaction, together with the various cognitive positions, skills, and interests of ourselves and others, becomes itself the focus of explicit remark.

Grasp and use of psychological concepts, construed this way, is not a matter of securing, or trying to secure, detailed predictions about or control of others’ behaviour. Co-cognitivism cannot coherently take it that detailed prediction and control are the main point of developing and refining awareness of others as thinkers. When I seek awareness of what I myself think it is not (usually or primarily) because doing so will enable me to manoeuvre myself through predicted or desired trajectories of behaviour. Rather arriving at explicit awareness of what I think about a topic, as I do when I set out to gather my thoughts on it, is part of exercising my cognitive skills effectively upon that topic. My immediate aim is become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of my cognitive position, make vividly available to myself, with as much detail as I can handle, what I already know (or take myself to know), in the hope that unwarranted assumptions, hidden conflicts of view or motivation, new implications or promising lines of enquiry, will become evident to me. The purpose of doing all this is to resolve some question about the topic. But how that question is to be resolved is as yet unclear to me and will only become fixed through my reflection. Similarly then, I do not (usually or primarily) seek awareness of what you think because I can then manoeuvre you through some predicted and desired trajectory. The hope is rather that our combined thinking will lead to appropriate resolution of some question in which we are both interested, but in a way which neither us now foresees in detail since it will only come into existence through our joint reflection.

Of course there are elements of truth in the familiar analytic, theory-theory view and co-cognitivism must acknowledge them. Knowing what others care about and believe does, of course, make possible some predictions of what they will do and

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3 Non-co-cognitivist versions of simulation theory are more sympathetic to one presupposition of theory-theory, namely that psychological thought is important because it enables us to anticipate what others will do or think and, perhaps, to control it. Such views take simulation to be a heuristic stand-in, playing the same role as mastery of a theory. I shall set such views on one side for the purposes of further discussion in this paper.
also underpins some attempts to influence their behaviour in the light of this. Some elements of paradigm co-cognitive interactions with others show exactly these possibilities being actualised. For example, I may need to think about whether you might be interested in a certain project and whether your joining is likely to be fruitful, in order to decide whether to invite you. But to know that someone might usefully join a project is not to know, and hence to plan to cause to appear, the exact contribution which that person will make.

Co-cognitivism must also be realistic about human life, must acknowledge that much interaction with others is not trustingly co-operative and open-minded. There is a great deal of rivalry, dislike, distrust and mere indifference between human beings. Knowledge about others, including knowledge of their thoughts, can and does inform planning (some of it private and self-interested) in interaction with them. Modes of attempted action may occur, by one person on another, which resemble instrumental dealings with complex inanimate items, in that they are attempts to manoeuvre others into particular performances. In short, plenty of thought of a predictive and controlling kind, both well-intentioned and ill-intentioned, both public and private, both strategic and more detailed, goes into shaping interactions with others. Plainly there is much more to be said in clarification of the ideas of ‘co-operation’, ‘prediction’, ‘control’ and the like, and about how their varieties can blend or clash.

But however all this works out in a full and realistic account of the complexities of human interaction, acknowledgement of these elements of truth in the familiar analytic view cannot threaten the central claim of co-cognitivism. To see this, note that all the mentioned relations to others (dislike, detached plans to predict and control in detail, etc.) are attitudes I can, at times and in certain respects, take to myself. Taking these attitudes to myself, however, is not in conflict with, and can only be one strand in, a life in which I also take myself to be capable of settling questions, about what is the case and what is to be done, by reflection on them. And thinking of myself in that way requires me to take my thoughts to be not merely things inside me which cause me to behave but also states which provide me with starting points from which I reflect. Similarly, then, the facts that there is sometimes dislike of others or attempts at detailed manipulation and control of them, do not prevent me also taking others to be sometimes responsible subjects of their thoughts. And if I do regard them this way, and also live with them a life which is at least partly co-operative, i.e. a life where the questions ‘What shall we do?’ and ‘What is the case?’ arise for us, then we shall need psychological concepts, with the logical shape and pattern of use which the co-cognitivist sketches, in order to engage effectively and fruitfully with each other as potential co-cognisers and co-operators.

3 Social anti-individualism
In this section I shall outline social anti-individualism about thought content. The account calls extensively on Burge’s pioneering work and is, I believe, an accurate reading of at least some of what he urges. But we should note that, for our purposes in this paper, it is the substantive view and not its accuracy as exegesis of Burge which is the important matter.

4 In the Postscript to the original article (Burge 2007 pp.151-81) Burge is at pains to stress that his claim is about the mind, about what thoughts people really do have. It is not just about ways it is convenient to talk about thoughts. That should be borne in mind when reading some of the quotations below from the original article.
Anti-individualism says that ‘the natures and correct individuation of many of an individual person’s intentional, or representational, mental states and events commonly depend in a constitutive way on relations that the individual bears to a wider social environment.’ (Burge 2007, 151) An implication of this is that a person may be credited with a thought even when his or her grasp of the concepts deployed in it is partial or defective.5

Let us start with the famous thought experiment by which Burge introduces the idea. We are to consider two people whose individual histories are physically qualitatively identical, at least at the local level, in that they hear the same sounds, encounter the same materials, undergo the same physiological processes and the like. In particular they each hear the sound ‘arthritis’ many times in the course of becoming more or less competent speakers of their respective languages, and they thereby acquire dispositions to use that sound in expressing their thoughts. Their wider social settings, however, are different. One of them lives among us, where ‘arthritis’ is standardly applied to inflammations occurring specifically in the joints, and would be explained as so doing by lexicographers and doctors. The other lives in a community where the word ‘arthritis’ is standardly used in a different way, to label not only what we apply it to but also some ailments occurring outside the joints. This other community, then, associates a different concept with their word.

Ex hypothesi, these two individuals utter qualitatively similar sounds, in particular (as Burge develops the case) each of them says ‘I have arthritis in my fingers’, ‘It is better to have arthritis than cancer of the liver’ and ‘I may have arthritis in my thigh.’ But what thoughts do they express when they utter these sounds?

Concerning the second individual, his life has not offered him the standard way of acquiring our concept and nothing has been said to indicate that he has acquired it in some non-standard way. But failing such special conditions, there are no grounds for reporting his thoughts by content clauses containing our word ‘arthritis’ in oblique contexts. Reporting them briefly seems better done by coining another word, ‘tharthritis’ perhaps, which we use to express his community’s concept.

By contrast it is natural to say of the first individual, the member of our community, that he thinks he has arthritis in his fingers, that it is better to have arthritis than cancer of the liver and that he may have arthritis in his thigh. Most of us would not hesitate in giving such reports and thus in, seemingly, crediting him with possession of the concept of arthritis, even though his last remark shows that his grasp of the concept of arthritis is defective. A central recommendation of anti-individualism is to take such everyday reports at face value, as giving the plain truth about what the subject thinks. Burge puts the idea thus: ‘[W]e attribute beliefs and thoughts to people even when they incompletely understand contents of those very beliefs and thoughts. . . . [W]herever the subject has attained a certain competence in large relevant parts of his language and has (implicitly) assumed a certain general commitment or responsibility to the communal conventions governing the language’s symbols, the expressions the subject uses take on a certain inertia in determining attributions of mental content to him. In particular the expressions the subject uses

5 The concept of ‘concept’ is a murky one. For purposes of this paper we shall proceed as if the traditional style of idea, involving necessary and sufficient conditions and some version of the analytic/synthetic distinction, were defensible. There is much that is very questionable in that view. But it seems unlikely that the individualist would be helped by introducing the distinctions and ideas needed to get to grips with any of the complexities in this area.
sometimes provide the content of his mental states or events even though he only partially understands, or even misunderstands, some of them.’ (Burge 2007, 147)

There are further aspects of the view which it will be helpful to clarify. Let us start with the relation an individual needs to have to a wider social environment in order for what goes on in that environment to bear constitutively on his or her thoughts. Burge writes: ‘Individuals can fashion idiosyncratic uses of communal words. If their usage corresponds to their own understanding, and they do not rely in unconscious ways on others for fixing the applications of their words or concepts, individuals can cut themselves off from communal usage. It is no part of my view that just because a person is using the same word forms as others in a given social network, the person’s words express the same concepts that his fellows’ words do. Any dependence on others for linguistic or psychological content derives from reliance on others through certain types of causal relations with them.’ (Burge 2007, 176) But what causal relations are these?

Burge is sometimes read as saying that historical facts about how the subject’s use of a word was acquired, are the only important ones relevant to his or her concepts and hence his or her thought contents. It seems to me, however, that this is not the best interpretation. At one point he asks us to consider an individual who learns a word in one community and then moves to another community where the usage is slightly different. In later employment of that word in the second community, the individual intends to be following the local practice. Of this case he says: ‘[M]embers of the parent community would not, and should not, attribute mental contents to him on the basis of homophonic construal of his words. Here the individual’s intentions or attitudes toward communal conventions and communal conceptions seem more important than the causal antecedents of his transactions with a word . . . ’ (Burge 2007, 147-8)

What this suggests is the following view. The individual described has the intention of conforming to the currently recognised best practice of the place where he now is, rather than earlier usage at the other place where he learned the word; it is, therefore, the usage round him at the present time which fixes his thought content; but had his present intention been different, had it been directed to usage at another time or another place, then the content would have been correspondingly different. This is how anti-individualism will be understood in what follows. Hence it is not of a merely historical kind.

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6 He is so interpreted by Clark and Chalmers (1998), who contrast their ‘extended mind’ hypothesis with Burge’s view, saying ‘This externalism [i.e. their own view] differs greatly from the standard variety advocated by Putnam and Burge . . . . [In the standard variety the] external features responsible for the difference in . . . beliefs [between my twin and myself] are distal and historical, at the other end of a lengthy causal chain. Features of the present are not relevant . . . Because of their distal nature, they [i.e. the features cited by Putnam and Burge] play no role in driving the cognitive process in the here-and-now.’ (Quoted from Clark 2008, p. 222.)

One way of putting the view defended here is that, whatever may be true of Putnam’s claims, which we shall not discuss further, this is the not the best reading of the view Burge proposes. In social anti-individualism communal usage plays the role in supporting concept possession which, in Clark and Chalmers’ ‘extended mind’ story, Otto’s diary plays in supporting Otto’s belief. So features of the present do, in anti-individualism, drive cognitive processes in the here and now and anti-individualism is a version of the extended mind hypothesis.
There is another and related point at which the understanding of anti-individualism called on in this paper diverges from what a quick reading of some passages in Burge might suggest. At one point he writes ‘What I want to stress is that to a fair degree, mentalistic attribution rests not on the subject’s having mastered the contents of the attribution, and not on his having behavioural dispositions peculiarly relevant to those contents, but on his having a certain responsibility to communal conventions governing, and conceptions associated with, symbols that he is disposed to use.’ (Burge 2007, 148)

This might lead one to think that, for an anti-individualist, no behavioural dispositions have any bearing on a person’s possession of a concept. That view might go with the idea (rejected above) that it is only the historical origin of a word’s use which is of importance in determining the concept. In addition, picking up on the phrase ‘responsibility to communal conventions’, a further idea might be that attributing a concept involves taking a view on how a person ought to behave, i.e. on his or her liability to be held to some normative standard, perhaps the one set by the historical facts of origin of word use. On these kinds of views, possessing a concept would have nothing to do with any actual current disposition to behaviour.

These ideas, denying the relevance of present dispositions and invoking instead the historical and/or the merely normative, will not be how anti-individualism is understood here. There are other, and in context more plausible, ways of reading the quoted passage. We may take it that by ‘behavioural dispositions peculiarly relevant to those contents’ Burge means dispositions such as the disposition to judge of some perceptually presented item that it is a paradigm F or the disposition to respond ‘No’ on hearing the noises ‘If something is F must it be G?’ Some packet of dispositions of this kind will define the community’s currently recognised best practice with respect to the content of the word in question. Such dispositions are typically individualist ones, in the sense that the kinds of circumstances referred to in the antecedent (being perceptually presented with an item, hearing some sounds) are independent of the conventions and practices in the surrounding society.

Such dispositions, however, are not the only ones potentially relevant to grasp of a concept, according to anti-individualism. Present in the situation are also ‘intentions or attitudes toward communal conventions and communal conceptions’. These bring with them dispositions which are second level, by contrast with the first level individualist ones noted above, in the sense that they are dispositions to acquire such first level dispositions. This is because the intentions and attitudes will show up in tendency to augment or correct individualist and first level practice in the light of exposure to other and better first level practice.

For an example of this consider the person whose grip on the concept of arthritis is faulty. As described by Burge, it is an important part of the story that he readily accepts the doctor’s explanation that he cannot have arthritis in his thigh, since (as the doctor tells him) arthritis is specifically an inflammation of joints. (Burge 2007, 104-5) Refusal to accept such correction would be surprising and would suggest to us that the speaker has been using his own cranky idiolect all along. And if this is how things go, we would no longer be happy to attribute to him thoughts with ‘arthritis’ in oblique contexts. Our willingness to attribute thoughts using ‘arthritis’ in oblique contexts is thus bound up with certain of his current dispositions, namely the second level ones which come with his commitment to being a responsible co-operator in the cognitive practice focused for us by use of the word ‘arthritis’.

Could those second level dispositions alone be sufficient to credit someone with the concept? Perhaps not. There is plausibility in the idea that concept possession
also requires at least some appropriate dispositions of the first level kind, for example those involved in grasp of the logical category of the item to which the concept applies and some of the item’s essential characteristics. To deny this seems to allow that someone might have the concept ‘water’ while taking the word ‘water’ to be a number word and to apply an item which is non-concrete. In what follows we shall assume such gross misunderstanding does rule out possession of the concept in question and that at least some appropriate first-level dispositions are in place. But the crucial point is that, according to anti-individualism, concept possession does not require a complete or flawless set of first level dispositions corresponding to current best practice in defining the concept.

We may present the proposal in a schematic example thus. Let us take a word ‘F’ which expresses the concept C and suppose that there are three first level individualist dispositions as to its use currently constituting best practice, D1, D2 and D3. Let us say D3 is the disposition to respond ‘Yes’ to the question ‘If something is F must it be G?’ Ex hypothesi, D1-D3 will be exhibited by those who have the current best grasp on C, and who express their grasp of C through ‘F’. Consider now a person who has acquired the word ‘F’ but is not so well-informed as these persons. He has D1 and D2, but he lacks D3, and has D4 instead, answering with ‘No’ rather than ‘Yes’ to the question ‘If something is F must it be G?’ He is, however, committed to the cognitive and linguistic practices of his community and in virtue of this has a general disposition to respond to evidence of best practice by augmenting or correcting his first level dispositions. Given the actual facts of how ‘F’ is used in his community, it follows that he is disposed to acquire D3, i.e. he is disposed to be disposed to answer ‘Yes’ to the question ‘If something is F must it be G?’ and he will in fact acquire D3, given appropriate experience. Is this complexity of dispositions sufficient for his grasping the concept C? The anti-individualist says that it is, although, admittedly, the grasp is currently defective. The individualist, by contrast, says that the only factors relevant to what concepts the persons possesses, and so to the content of the thoughts he expresses with his words, are the first level individualist dispositions to use of that word.

A final clarification is also important for what follows. Anti-individualism, as understood here, is a claim about what is sufficient for concept possession and hence for thought content, not about what is necessary for concept possession. The anti-individualist can allow that a person may be credited with a concept and so with thoughts of certain content, in virtue of other kinds of cognitive capacities than the ones outlined above. For example, Burge’s man does indeed have the first level and individualist dispositions distinctive of an expert user of the alternative, tharthritis, concept. There is thus a ‘tharthritissy’ cast to his thoughts. And for some of the contexts and purposes for which we attribute thoughts, perhaps it is helpful to characterise him as thinking with the tharthritis concept. So the issue is not whether or not Burge’s man thinks that he may have tharthritis in his thigh. The anti-individualist can concede that he does (in some sense) have this thought. The question is whether he also has the thought that he may have arthritis in his thigh.  

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7 Burge seems to agree on this. He remarks (2007, 122-3) that to overturn anti-individualism his opponents, the individualists, ‘must not only establish that the subject held the particular attitudes that they advocate attributing; they must also justify a denial of the ordinary attributions literally interpreted.’ His discussion, which follows on pp. 123-4, is not designed to show the falsity of the kind of thought
4 Co-cognitivism and anti-individualism

Certain reasons for rejecting anti-individualism may stem from misunderstanding what the proposal is, for example from thinking that the social relations claimed to be constitutive of thought are merely historical and/or normative or from thinking that the anti-individualist must deny any role for the kind of thought-attributions which the individualist favours. These issues were addressed in the last section. With them out of the way, it may be that the defender of the individualist notion of content may admit that the anti-individualist view is not obviously absurd, that maybe we do sometimes attribute content by anti-individualist criteria.

Perhaps, then, we should simply allow that we have two notions of content, an individualist one and an anti-individualist one, and relatedly two practices for ascribing content. But it is unsatisfactory to stop here. Questions remain about the relation of these two notions of thought content. Does one of them have priority, with use of the other explained as secondary? And if so, which way round does the priority go? This section will argue that the grip of theory-theory explains at least some of the attraction of the idea that the notion of individualist content must be prior. A different reason for favouring individualist notions is that they fit better with Cartesian accounts of first person authority, on which the mind is transparent to the subject. This line of thought is, however, difficult to run in tandem with theory-theory, which sits most comfortably in a naturalist framework. So we will not consider it here, but will return to some aspects of it in Sections 5 and 6.

Let us consider theory-theory first. Suppose that our environment contains sophisticated drinks machines, which dispense coffee, tea, cocoa, milk, sugar etc. in varying strengths, quantities and temperatures when combinations of buttons are pressed. The machine company from time to time adjusts the detailed workings of the machines, and hence which buttons are associated with which outcomes, to reflect such things as the changing seasons of the year or difficulties in obtaining some ingredients. These adjustments are indicated, for those who know the code, by a pattern of lights on the front of each machine. The pattern shows how the machine is currently programmed, i.e. what options are available and by pressing which buttons.

attractions the individualists favour, but rather their likely unavailability and uselessness. The reflections of this paper tally with Burge’s thoughts on these issues. A different reason for favouring individualist notions is that they fit better with Cartesian accounts of first person authority, on which the mind is transparent to the subject. This line of thought is, however, difficult to run in tandem with theory-theory, which sits most comfortably in a naturalist framework. So we will not consider it here, but will return to some aspects of it in Sections 5 and 6.

Burge for the most part presents anti-individualism on its merits as a plausible factual description of (some of) our practices. But in one of the few places where he talks of the wider underpinnings of the view, co-cognitive ideas seem to be invoked as part of the mix. He writes ‘The key to our attribution of mental contents in the face of incomplete mastery or misunderstanding lies largely in social functions associated with maintaining and applying the standard [i.e. the standard set by the conventions and conceptions of the community] . . . Symbolic expressions are the overwhelmingly dominant source of detailed information about what people think, intend, and so forth. Such detail is essential not only to much explanation and prediction, but also to fulfilling many of our co-operative enterprises and to relying on one another for second-hand information. Words interpreted in conventionally established ways are familiar, palpable and public. They are common coin, a relatively stable currency. These features are crucial to achieving the ends of mentalistic attribution just cited.’ (Burge 2007, 149, italics mine).
Unfortunately the programming process is not wholly reliable, and there are often minor discrepancies between a machine’s actual dispositions to dispense drinks and what the programme associated with the lights prescribes. So, for example, the lights may show that the machine is programmed to dispense three types of coffee on pressing buttons 1 to 3, and while buttons 1 and 2 deliver as indicated, pressing button 3 will actually deliver tea rather than coffee. What a user can read off from the display of lights is therefore not the dispositions of the machine in every accurate detail, but only that it will exhibit some subset of those dispositions which define the programme indicated by its lights.

In this kind of situation it is useful to know how the machine is programmed, that it is delivering winter options through buttons 1 to 12, but that no chocolate is available, or whatever. A person who has that knowledge is better placed than one who does not grasp the significance of the lights at all. But, given that our interest in a machine is an understanding of its structure which enables us to get particular drinks out of it reliably, it would be even better to know its detailed quirks. Information in terms of programme installed gives only a blurry and disjunctive picture of what we would like to represent more sharply. Characterising a machine in terms of its programme is therefore a second best, one which of course we will fall back on, given inability to find out and record the individual quirks. But if we could find out the quirks, the concepts we then arrived at, in effect concepts of more finely modified programmes, would provide a better way of recording what we would ideally like to know.

Acceptance of theory-theory represents our relations with other people as being analogous to our relations with these machines. Psychological concepts are the ones by which we represent, as best we can, the causal structures animating human bodies and by employing which we hope to be able to predict, explain and sometimes control what those bodies do. From this perspective information about each other formulated in terms of individualist content, the fuller and more detailed the better, is what we would most like to have. It is only such information which could enable us to anticipate and explain others’ behaviour and allow us to control it in detail. Lacking that, information of any kind about others’ dispositions may, of course, be of some use. In particular, information that a person has a second level disposition, but of a not-fully-reliable kind, to acquire certain first level dispositions, those exhibited by certain other people in his or her environment, is better than nothing. Such knowledge provides at least some indications about a person’s probable first level dispositions. But specification of a person’s psychological states in terms of these second level dispositions, i.e. in terms of the anti-individualist notion of content, will give only a blurry and disjunctive version of what we aspire to, namely a sharp representation of the individualist dispositions of each person. It is therefore merely a second best. And where we get nearer the sharp representation, for example when we become aware of the oddities of Burge’s man, then we grasp the contents of the mind more accurately.

Everyone will acknowledge that what is actually available to us in everyday contexts is, usually, only anti-individualist content. It is possible to know that someone is an averagely competent language user and that he or she sincerely says that such and such. Observation, together with induction, will give us this information (distinctively philosophical scepticism aside). And this information in turn will give us knowledge of the anti-individualist content of the thought expressed. But having this knowledge does not equip us with grip on detailed individualist content of the person’s thought because. The commonplace intelligibility of Burge’s examples shows (as he stresses) that there is frequently incompleteness and/or minor error in
people’s understandings of words, when judged by the standards of best practice. These incompletenesses and errors vary from person to person, and for any individual are likely to shift over time. To become aware of them and track their evolution would require a whole battery of tests and observations, continually repeated. We cannot do these tests and observations, any more than we can investigate in detail every drinks machine before we try to use it. So most of the time when associating a content with another’s remark we have to use the anti-individualist notion.

Given the grip of the theory-theory outlook sketched above, these facts about our epistemological situation, and the corollary that the anti-individualist notion of content is unavoidably the one in daily use, will not shake the conviction that, all the same, the individualist notion is the prior one, and that having to employ the anti-individualist notion is being forced back on second best.

If we suppose, however, that co-cognitivism supplies the correct account of the role which shapes psychological concepts, then things look very different. The crucial point is that, in co-cognitivism, others’ thoughts are identified not with a view to predicting or manoeuvring their particular behaviour but with a view to such things as seeing how those others are likely to be located vis a vis various potential co-cognitive projects, made available by our culture. For these purposes, psychological information about each other couched in terms of the anti-individualist concept of content is centrally what we need and individualist content is of marginal interest, at best.

To see the force of this claim, let us consider some scenarios. Suppose we are about to debate whether we should devote more resources to treatment of arthritis, or whether other medical conditions have a higher priority. Burge’s man is one of our acquaintances. He is in general a sensible and well-intentioned person whose contributions to debates are helpful. So we invite him to talk with us and are minded to take his views seriously. Here are some ways things might go.

(a) He makes useful contributions, for example reminding us to take account of the numbers of sufferers of various diseases and the severity of their suffering, drawing to our attention recent reports of progress in research on various diseases, and the like. His oddity of understanding of ‘arthritis’ never shows up. And even if it had it would have made no difference to the utterances he contributes or to their weight and relevance in determining the decision we reach, since if it had things would have developed as in the next scenario.

(b) He starts out making useful contributions, as in (a). Then by some casual remark he reveals his faulty understanding of ‘arthritis’ and is quickly put right. Or perhaps someone else’s remark provides evidence to him of the link of arthritis to joints, and he absorbs the information and adjusts his understanding accordingly. After this adjustment discussion flows on just as in (a) and to the same conclusion, in the light of the same utterances, appreciated in the same way as to their weight and relevance.

(c) He starts out making useful contributions and then, as in (b), his faulty understanding is rectified. But this time, as it happens, he has further information and/or preferences bearing particularly on diseases which manifest primarily in the joints. In the light of these further attitudes and/or preferences, the utterances he makes in the latter part of the discussion are different from those he contributes in scenarios (a) and (b) and the final decision comes out differently in consequence.

What these scenarios illustrate is that it is practicable and fruitful for people to join in discussion on a topic provided, firstly, that as part of their shared life, they are committed to responsible use of the same language and, second, that their particular
propositional attitudes deploying the concepts of that language interlock in such a way as to make that topic one of interest to them. Given these things, discussion and action can usefully run forward, even when there are as yet unnoticed gaps and oddities in individuals’ understanding of their shared language. This is because, in most cases, the gaps and oddities are either of no relevance to the issues in hand or get ironed out in the course of the discussion through operation of the second order dispositions. So the fact that Burge’s man more or less understands ‘arthritis’, and is committed to using it responsibly is what we need to know in order for there to be a solid ground for our engagement with him. For sure, his thoughts at the start of all the conversations, and still at the end of (a), have a tharthritissy cast. But ‘So what?’ says the defender of the priority of anti-individualist content. This was something which, at the start of all the conversations, we did not know and which we still do not know at the end of some – and there are no ill effects.

An objector may however point out that there are other cases where our ignorance does have ill effects. There may be an oddity in a person’s understanding which is of relevance to the matter in hand, but does not show up, and which consequently causes problems down the line. A fourth scenario with Burge’s man brings this out.

(d) Things are potentially as in (c) but the faulty understanding is not rectified. So he does not make the different contributions he would have made had he come to understand ‘arthritis’ better. All this comes to light later, and unhappiness and difficulty ensue.

What does the possibility of such unhappy outcomes show about the importance of knowledge of content, on the individualist notion of content? Does it give the notion any claim to priority? To answer this question we need to consider how and why, given a co-cognitivist orientation, interest in individualist content might emerge and what role knowledge of it could play.

Let us start with naïve co-cognisers, who take it for granted that there is only one understanding of any word, viz. their own, and that every other speaker shares it. These co-cognisers use psychological vocabulary, with content attributed by anti-individualist criteria, and are oblivious to possible individual divergences. For these co-cognisers such things as Burge’s man saying ‘arthritis may be in the thigh’ will be thoroughly bemusing, and outcomes such as in (d) will present themselves as mysterious breakdowns in mutual comprehension. Such glitches do not prevent co-cognitive activity going forward successfully most of the time, but plainly they invite investigation.

As such naïve co-cognisers then become more reflective they will become aware that competence in co-cognition is enabled by psychological capacities (including second order dispositions, not always fully actualised, to acquire first order dispositions) which may result in individuals having different idiosyncratic underpinnings for their outward demonstrations of averagely competent language use. With this will come awareness that such divergences of understanding may cause problems and that it would therefore sometimes be useful to identify and remove them in advance. And also there will come awareness that, even where divergences cannot be identified and removed in advance, glitches do not have to be accepted as mysterious but may be explicable after the event, through delving into the underpinnings.

In these ways knowledge of the individualist content of another’s thought emerges as a legitimate topic of interest. But the role given such knowledge in the above account reveals it as secondary, in the context of co-cognition, in two ways.
First, knowledge of individualist content is not the knowledge which enables co-cognition. What that needs is awareness that the other is committed to a shared life, with its shared concepts mediated by shared language and is a reasonably competent language user. Knowledge of individualist content merely enables some sophistications of the practice of co-cognition, in pre-emptive avoidance of problems or post hoc explanations of glitches. Second, it is not obvious that the more knowledge of individualist content the better. It is an empirical matter whether, and how much, knowledge of facts about fine variations in individualist underpinnings of competence with language will be of use or interest to us. Reflection suggests that much of it will be of no use or interest at all.

5 Self-knowledge
This section sketches lightly the view of self-knowledge which will be assumed and built on in the following section. Discussion of knowledge of one’s own and other minds often takes off from the observation that self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions are (in many typical cases) contrasted, the former being authoritative and the latter not so. Familiar lines of reflection from this contrast lead in the direction of robust metaphysical dualism, separating a private, mental, inner realm, to which its subject has privileged access, from a public, physical, outer realm, to which all have potential but fallible access. And, as is well known, such dualism has problems, recoiling from which functionalist and physicalist accounts of the meaning and role of psychological concepts have attractions. The mental, it is said, is whatever plays a certain causal role vis a vis the body and it turns out that it can be understood in scientific and naturalistic terms. The disadvantage of such strongly naturalist views, however, is that they supply only unconvincing versions of the contrasts of self- and other-ascription which got us puzzled in the first place.

A distinctive route out of these familiar tangles starts from discarding the observational picture of how first person authority must be grounded, which is common to the two problematic views, and replacing it with a picture calling on the notions of expression and avowal. This picture takes for granted that a subject of psychological states is an embodied agent, and that talk of a subject’s feelings, perceptions, thoughts, aims and the like is talk of how the subject is oriented to its world, hence of what it is striving for, fleeing from, enjoying or the like, in short of what it is doing or might do. Psychological states must thus have ‘expressions’. But we should hear this not as saying that a psychological state is something ‘inner’, which is separable from but causally linked to something ‘outer’ viz its ‘expression’,

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10 The starting point here must be Wittgenstein (1953). McGinn (1997) provides a useful introduction and a point of entry to the extensive literature. John McDowell (in the papers on Wittgenstein in his 1998a and his papers on Epistemology in his 1998b) has done much to bring out the attraction of the ideas of knowledge of self and others which is gestured at in this section. Bar-On (2004) articulates and defends at length a Wittgensteinian expressivist account of self-knowledge. What I offer here is meant only as a condensed presentation of a line of thought worked out through much excellent detailed discussion by many scholars. The only move of any potential originality here is locating Moran’s discussion of our authority in speaking of our beliefs in this context. It may be that seeing it in the light of the broader picture might provide ways of answering objections to Moran’s view, which charge him with over-intellectualising matters (Carman 2003) or offering an account which cannot be generalised (Child 2009).
where the ‘expression’ is something which might be characterised in non-
psychological terms. Rather ‘expression’ is better heard here as ‘vehicle’ or
‘embodiment’, in an analogous way to that in which a machine’s efficiency will be
‘expressed’ (carried, embodied) in features of its operation, some of which, such as
speed or quietness, may be easily observable. So a creature’s being in a psychological
state is the creature’s having some distinctive bodily orientation. And this bodily
vehicle of the psychological state may involve the occurrence of easily observable
behaviour. Such behaviour is then rightly seen as ‘expressing’, i.e. being an aspect of
the existence of, the state.

Some expressive behaviour (frowning, staring and advancing threateningly
when angry, nuzzling and grooming in affection, wincing in pain) is natural (at least
to many mammals like ourselves), i.e. not bound up with transmitted culture. But for
us humans the expressive repertoire is extended and fine-tuned beyond this as we
absorb the culture and language of our group. By interaction with others already
operating in the culture, we acquire the capacity to take part in the social activities it
sustains. A central element of this is becoming capable of finely discriminated
perceptions, feelings, thinkings and intendings, in part through acquiring the capacity
to use their inextricably linked linguistic expressions. So, for example, where jointly
preparing for and taking part in the autumn feast is part of our culture, we come to be
aware of the world as offering resources and possible actions relevant to the autumn
feast. And it is integral to these awarenesses that in appropriate circumstances we
express them by utterances - ‘There is not enough food here for the autumn feast’,
‘Let’s move on then’, etc.

The next step is to fit avowals, i.e. first person, present tense psychological
ascriptions into this story. On the Wittgensteinian view being sketched here, acquiring
the ability to make avowals is to be seen as acquisition of yet another way of
expressing the states which are (semantically) self-ascribed. Thus one who is aware of
the world as not offering enough for the feast may say not just ‘There is not enough
food here for the autumn feast’ but ‘I think that there is not enough food here for the
autumn feast’. And one who is aware of moving on as advantageous may say not just
‘Let’s move on then’ but ‘I would like us to move on’. In acquiring these forms of
expression we enrich the possibilities of our social life still further, by manifesting
explicit awareness of the fact that we are different centres of agency, with differing
views and objectives. Thus in discussion we can present our contributions in a way (‘I
think . . .’, ‘I want . . .’) which acknowledges fallibility and the possibility of
difference from others. We acquire also the ability to reveal ourselves to each other,
to get to know each other better, by confiding and comparing feelings, views and
projects.

What is said here is not in conflict with the remarks of Section 2, about the
role of psychological concepts for social, co-operative animals. On the contrary, it
fills in that picture, with more detail about the particular role of avowals in such a life.
To play the role sketched these utterances must have the role of expressing the states
they are about and not merely that expressing the belief, arrived at by some third-
personal observation of oneself, that the states exist. A contribution ‘I think that p ‘
made to a debate, where it is merely a report of some behavioural patterns one has
observed in oneself and a conjecture, on that basis, about how one is causally
configured, cannot have the role of tentative contribution to the debate which it in fact
has. One can give a hug to a person one likes, or one can say ‘I’ve become very fond
of you’. But the latter will not have the role of being a delicate, verbal version of the
former (but still risky and self-revealing) if it is merely a report of one’s observations and conjectures about one’s behaviour.

To summarise this section so far, what has been sketched is the emergence of authoritative, first person present tense ascriptions. Such avowals are authoritative not because they reflect the outcome of some super-reliable inward directed quasi-perception but because, in a normally functioning person, making the avowal is an expression (in the above explained sense) of the state which the remark, considered semantically, is about. The avowal is thus both an expression of the state and a truth-evaluable description of it.

Let us finally note something which is distinctive of expressions of some propositional attitudes, centrally beliefs and intentions, and which is important for the argument of the next section. These propositional attitudes are orientations to the world for which (unlike sensations) we may have reasons, which are taken to be justified or unjustified, and for which we may be held responsible. In ascribing beliefs or intentions to ourselves and others we thus take for granted that we are capable (at least to some extent) of responding appropriately to reasons. These facts contribute to the distinctive aetiology and distinctive logical character of the avowal of belief and intention, as Moran persuasively brings out (2001). As to aetiology, in responding to the question ‘Do you believe that p? I will do the same as I would do in responding to the question ‘Is it the case that p?’, viz. I attend to the world in whatever way is appropriate for the world’s revealing to me, as I am then situated, its character as a world in which p, or not p, as the case may be. For example I look whether p or I try to remember whether p or I attend to evidence as to whether p. And as to logical character, in avowing a belief, a person (usually) presents him or herself in the role of responsible cognitive agent, aware of and willing to shoulder the responsibilities which come with that. Thus if I say ‘I believe Albert has arthritis’, I present myself as forming, or having formed, that belief appropriately and as ready to do what is required, cognitively or practically, to carry through responsibly with the commitments which come with the belief. We shall return to this crucial matter of responsibility and commitment below.

6 Your knowing what I think
So now, with this background view in place, let us press on and consider the implications of adopting social anti-individualism about thought content.

Burge notes a tension between anti-individualism and insistence on strong and extensive first person authority. ‘The main upshot of the thought experiments in “Individualism and the Mental” is that individuals have far less cognitive control over discursive accounts of the natures of their mental states and the contents of those states than it has been common to concede in philosophy. The prevalence of incomplete understanding, even incomplete understanding that cannot be remedied by mere reflection, is one significant sign of this limitation.’ (Burge 2007, 178)

By ‘cognitive control’ we shall take Burge to mean ability to pronounce on something authoritatively. An individual will have more or less cognitive control depending on how much he or she can pronounce on authoritatively, when calling only on his or her own resources. Burge’s point is, then, that anti-individualism implies that our minds are not transparent to us, in the sense that it is not the case that each of us has total cognitive control over discursive accounts of the nature and

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11 Evans, in Chapter 7 of his The Varieties of Reference (1982), is the starting point for this very important line of thought.
content of our thoughts. Mental states and their contents have a depth or complexity to them, the full details of which may not be instantly available to their subject. For example, to think of something as arthritis is to have a thought the content of which is partly defined by the condition that what is thought of occur only in the joints. But if I have the same oddity as Burge’s man, then if I call only on my own resources, I do not have the ability, to pronounce correctly, let alone authoritatively, on this matter.

So cognitive control of one kind is, given anti-individualism, less than it has been common to suppose. But might it also be an upshot that cognitive control of another kind is greater than it has been common to suppose, namely cognitive control by one individual over discursive accounts of the contents of another’s mental states? Can we make sense of this proposal?

Here is an example of the sort of exchange mentioned at the start of the paper.

A: What do you think about Albert’s lameness?
B: I think he’s got arthritis.
A: Ah. So you think the trouble is in the joint rather than the bone.
B: Oh – do I? Well, if you say so. I hadn’t realised arthritis could only be in joints.

The proposal we are considering invites us to read this exchange the following way. The content of B’s thought is constituted by the conventions and conceptions connected with his words, including the word ‘arthritis’. A’s grasp of ‘arthritis’ is richer than B’s and so A’s thinking constitutes, in part, the conventions and conceptions which contribute to constituting the content of B’s thought. A is therefore in a position to articulate aspects of B’s thought which B himself cannot currently articulate. A and B have shared awareness of these facts. Against this background A, calling on his richer understanding of arthritis, offers B an articulation of B’s thought and B accepts it. In doing this, B becomes explicitly aware of something which previously he thought only implicitly.

This may seem bizarre and an immediate reaction may be to object and propose an alternative account of what is going on. What A says influences B’s psychological states. After A’s second utterance B comes to think, in an explicit way, that what Albert has is some affliction which occurs only in the joints. And it is what A says which produces this explicit thought in B. Everyone will acknowledge these facts. But why, an objector may say, should we suppose that B already had those thoughts, in any sense at all?

The answer is that the central claim of anti-individualism is that a person’s commitment to the conventions and conceptions of his community brings with it grasp on the concepts expressed in the community’s language, and this grasp is, even if faulty, a grasp of the whole concept. So it brings with it some cognitive relation to all elements of the concept, even if the relation is more tenuous with some parts than others. To reject this, and instead to conceive of faulty grasp of concept C1 as consisting solely in full grasp of some other concept C2, bringing with it no relation to the bits of C1 which are not included in C2, is to fall back to a version of the individualist picture again. It is to neglect the real second-level dispositions which a committed individual has in connection with all elements of the concept and which are in part what his grasp of that concept consists in.

There has, however, undeniably been a significant change in B’s thinking, brought about by the conversation with A. What description of this change should the anti-individualist give? One description she must endorse is that it is a change from a less good to a better grasp on the concept of arthritis. But this does not get us very far. What we want is another way of describing matters which makes clearer the nature of B’s relation, even before A’s remarks, to the bits of the concept with respect to which
B’s grasp although existent was faulty. The contrast of ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’, invoked above, is offered as a gesture in this direction. How is it to be understood?

For a person to think something implicitly at a time is for him or her to entertain that content but not to be able, at that time, to articulate it by putting it into words. Implicit grasp often has the potential to be developed into explicit grasp, i.e. a grasp which can be articulated in words. For example a person judging that a shape is square may judge implicitly that it has four equal sides and four equal angles but not, initially at least, be able to spell out that content in words. Appropriate cognitive development may change this, so that at a later time the person can put the content into words. Sometimes all that is needed to bring such implicit content to explicit expression will be a period of reflection, focused on the question ‘What does it take for something to be square?’ But not all implicit content is so easy to bring to articulation. A person judging a shape to be square also judges that it is plane figure. This is implicit content which (in my experience at least) does not readily emerge just from a thinker asking him or herself ‘What does it take for something to be a square?’ Rather it requires prompting by another more knowledgeable person, for example through presentation of bent shapes which have four equal sides and equal angles between each pair of sides but are plainly not squares.

Can B’s thought that something is a case of arthritis have the implicit content that the thing in question is a case of a disease in the joints, in some analogous way? Certainly there is a striking difference between the cases of squareness and arthritis, as we have imagined them. In the case of squareness, even if in practice subjects require prompting in order to grasp explicitly that a square is a plane figure, solitary reflection, if imaginative enough, could be sufficient. But in the case of arthritis, solitary reflection, no matter how imaginative, will not enable B to articulate explicitly that arthritis is a disease in the joints. So B is more radically dependent on the promptings of the helpful friend than the person to whom the articulation of the implicit content of ‘square’ does not come easily. The proposal under consideration says, however, that this does not prevent the analogy going through. B’s thought is distinctively shaped by the detailed content carried in the community’s conventions and conceptions. Those conventions and conceptions fix it that the concept expressed by ‘arthritis’ is of a disease specifically of the joints. So the content is present in B’s thought, even though it takes A’s remark to prompt it into explicitness.

It is important to realise that the proposal is not a version of the idea, that A can, like a psychoanalyst, detect the evidence of a certain kind of causal structure in B, and can get B to acknowledge its existence, both of them operating in a third personal way. The suggestion is rather that A is authoritative in his pronouncement about B’s thought, and that the cognitive control which B lacks has not gone missing altogether, but has come to be located, in part at least, in A instead.

The rider, ‘in part at least’, is of importance here. By seeing that it is appropriate we can see how the proposal can preserve what is distinctive about a person’s relation to his or her own thoughts, viz. a special entitlement which he or she as subject has to pronounce on them. As noted at the start of Section 5, inability to account for such a distinctive relation to his or her own thoughts has been noted as a major weakness of purely naturalistic accounts of the mind and self-knowledge. Descartes was right that there is something distinctive here.

But it is wrong to conclude from this that our account of first person authority must repeat another feature of the Cartesian view, viz. saying not only that I do indeed have entitlement to say what my thoughts are, but also you have none. If first person authority were grounded in some distinctive metaphysics of private items accessible
only from one point of view we would have to agree not only that I can be authoritative about my thoughts, but also that you cannot be. But once that metaphysics is abandoned, in favour of the view sketched in Section 5, the way is open for the idea that first person authority might co-exist with second person authority. Perhaps we may both, sometimes, be in a position to pronounce on what I think, because we do the thing together.

We may spell out this idea in more detail as follows. My authority comes from the fact that it is up to me what I think, in the sense that I am cognitively active, in a way for which I am responsible, in forming my views. It would, however, follow from this that I am the sole person with authority to pronounce on what I think only if what I am responsible for cannot also be the responsibility of someone else. But is that right? We are already familiar with the idea of joint responsibility in the case of action. If there is a bank which can be robbed only by two people in co-operation, and you and I agree to do the deed, then it is up to each of us that the bank is robbed. The fact that it is up to you, and hence your responsibility, that the bank is robbed does not let me off the hook or vice versa. For sure, you can determine whether or not the bank is robbed, only given my willing complicity. But that does not mean that it is not up to you. And conversely I can determine whether or not the bank is robbed only given your complicity. But that does not mean that it is not up to me. Joint responsibility need not be less than full responsibility, for each party.  

What we need in the case of B’s views about arthritis is an analogous structure, and it may be set out as follows. Before the reported conversation, B believes, but only implicitly, that Albert’s lameness is due to a trouble in the joint. During the conversation both parties play active and responsible roles, in making this belief explicit. A plays a role by articulating the content and B by accepting A’s articulation. At the end of the conversation the two of them then have an explicit discursive account of what B thinks, in arriving at which they have knowingly co-operated and in which each has played an indispensable part, since A might not have offered the articulation and B might not have accepted it.

It follows that A can be authoritative about what B thinks. For sure, this authority requires B’s willingness to acknowledge the articulation offered. And that in turn requires B’s commitment to the ‘communal conventions and communal conceptions’ of the language. But still, with that in place, A is in a position to pronounce. But B is similarly authoritative about what he thinks. For sure, he can only be so given A’s willingness to offer an articulation. But still, with that in place, B is in a position to pronounce. The upshot is that loss of full cognitive control, ability to provide a discursive account all on one’s own, is not loss of authority, in the sense in which it is important for the relation of a person to his or her own thoughts. Authority in that sense has to do with taking responsibility for, not with sole control.

Our abilities to know various kinds of things depend upon the settings in which we find ourselves. The practice of authoritative self-ascription of thoughts depends on mental stability and integrity of various kinds. Hence there is room for scepticism where these things come into question, where a person is chronically weak willed, self-deceptive or suffering from some kinds of mental illness. The viability of the route to knowledge of other minds described above similarly has its own distinctive possibilities of breakdown. If you are to be able to articulate my thought

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12 For some recent work which moves the discussion of intention and action usefully from concentration of my intending and acting to our intending and acting see Velleman (1997), Gilbert (2009) and Tuomela (2006).
and we are thereby to be able to come to shared explicit knowledge of what I think, then we need to be right in taking each other to be part of the same language using practice and in taking you to grasp the concept in question better than I do. Also I need to understand your remark, and I need to be sincere in my acknowledgement of it. Reason to think that any of these conditions fails means that the route is not available (to say nothing of course of more conventional sceptical possibilities, that the seeming me is a mere hallucination of yours and the like).

Wittgensteinian reflections often have the characteristic that they return us to where we were, but with a livelier sense of the limits, challenges and possibilities of our position. Emphasis on expressive and constitutive aspects of first person authority do not divorce us from our practices of self-ascription or change how we go about self-ascription in everyday life. Rather they remove the confusions engendered by the self-observation model and open up spaces where we come to be more vividly aware of our responsibility for own thoughts. Somewhat similarly the account I have offered of one possible route to knowledge of others’ thoughts is not designed to suggest that our practices should change or indeed that anything can or should go on differently from the way it has been going on up to now. If there is a shift it will be in our having a more vivid sense of the way in which we are responsible to each other for our shared thoughts.

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