

Concepts and Abilities in Anti-Individualism*

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This paper is prompted by two realizations. The first realization is that most critical studies of Tyler Burge's "Individualism and the Mental" focus on the first step of the famous arthritis thought-experiment, in particular, on the claim that people can be said to think with concepts that they incompletely understand in significant and systematic ways.¹ Less attention by far is given to the thought-experiment's third and final step, in which it is argued that a counterfactual subject who lacked the concept *arthritis* would be incapable of having any thoughts or other attitudes about "arthritis as such."²

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¹ Cf. Donald Davidson, "Knowing One's Own Mind" (reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), "Epistemology Externalized" (reprinted in *op. cit.*); Akeel Bilgrami, *Belief & Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), chs. 2-3; Kent Bach, *Thought and Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), ch. 13; Gabriel Segal, *A Slim Book about Narrow Content* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), ch. 3; Tim Crane, "All the Difference in the World" (*Philosophical Quarterly* 41(162), Jan. 1991, pp. 1-25); Jerry Fodor, "Cognitive Science and the Twin-Earth Problem" (*Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 23(2), 1982, pp. 98-118); Gary Ebbs, *Rule-Following and Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), ch. 8; *Words & Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 148-151; Reinaldo Elugardo, "Burge on Content" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53(2), June, 1993), pp. 367-384; Sanford Goldberg, "Do Anti-Individualistic Construals of Propositional Attitudes Capture the Agent's Conceptions?" (*Nous* 36(4), Dec. 2002, pp. 597-621); Åsa Maria Wikforss, "Social Externalism and Conceptual Errors" (*Philosophical Quarterly* 51(203), April 2001, pp. 217-231), "Externalism and Incomplete Understanding" (*Philosophical Quarterly* 54(215), April 2004, pp. 287-294); Gurpreet Rattan, "Intellect and Concept" (forthcoming in B. Armour-Garb, D. Patterson, and J. Woodbridge, eds., *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic, and Communication: Meaning, Understanding, and Knowledge*).

² Burge, "Postscript to 'Individualism and the Mental'" (in *Foundations of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 162. On this, critics would appear to follow Burge's own lead: the most substantial discussions by far in "Individualism and the Mental" (reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*) are devoted to defeating possible objections to the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery (cf. pp. 111-114, 116-132). Comparatively little space is set aside for defending the conclusion at step 3 of the thought-experiment.

No doubt, the notion of incomplete concept mastery invoked at Step 1 of the thought-experiment raises a number of rich and complex philosophical questions, rewarding close attention. Nonetheless, this comparative dearth of attention to Step 3 is remarkable, since it is ostensibly here, and not at Step 1, that Burge intends to make the case for the general thesis of anti-individualism: the distinctively metaphysical doctrine that the nature or identity of many of our mental states “depend in a constitutive way on relations that the individual bears to a wider social environment.”³

In brief, then, most commentators seem to assume that the real work in the anti-individualist thought-experiments is done by the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery at Step 1, so that the conclusion at Step 3 would follow suit if only Step 1 were granted. The second realization prompting this paper, then, is that this is not true. Thus, the primary aim of this paper is to show that quite independently of whether we accept Burge’s invocation of incomplete concept mastery at step 1 of the thought-experiment, the conclusion offered at step 3 still lacks warrant. Burge’s argument cannot secure the conclusion it promises to secure. Moreover, even if it did, this conclusion would have none of the exciting consequences it is generally taken to have.

The official or generally accepted story concerning the anti-individualist thought-experiment is one that purports to take us directly from a description of the counterfactual subject’s social and physical environment to a conclusion concerning what concepts this

³ Burge, “Postscript to ‘Individualism and the Mental,’” p. 151. Many commentators seem to assume, implicitly or explicitly, that all Burge would need in order to establish anti-individualism would be to establish the cogency of the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery. On this view, anti-individualism simply *is* the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery, or else follows as a trivial consequence of it. I believe this is a mistake. For one, the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery is supported by claims concerning deference (e.g., that the subject *intends to defer* to experts or to conventionally accepted usage) which are arguably much too hedge-claused to serve as a major premise in an inference to the particular metaphysical conclusion that Burge is after (cf. “Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference” (reprinted in *op. cit.*) p. 309 and *nb*). But also, it seems clear that someone can accept several important forms of incomplete concept mastery and yet still resist the conclusion offered at step 3 of the argument (cf. Wikforss, “Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Content” (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 38(3), Sept. 2008, pp. 399-424), p. 413).

subject may have at his disposal, or what kinds of psychological states he is capable of tokening. This conclusion is supposed to carry a certain kind of modal force: it is not just that the counterfactual subject *is* not, as a matter of fact, tokening an *arthritis*-thought on the occasion in question. Rather, given the enviroing conditions, it would be *metaphysically impossible* for him to think these kinds of thoughts. On the official story, it appears to be largely a matter of indifference whether we pitch the argument in terms of concepts or in terms of cognitive abilities.⁴ The one would follow as a trivial consequence of the other, since possession of a concept *C* is construed simply in terms of the subject's ability to think *C*-thoughts, and *vice versa*.⁵ Since I will ultimately offer an argument according to which anti-individualism crucially misconstrues the relation between concepts and cognitive abilities, I will treat these matters separately, focusing on concepts first and cognitive abilities second.⁶

Thus, after examining Burge's argument for anti-individualism in more detail (section I), the first task of this paper is to show (section II) that there is no sound argument that can carry us, with the relevant kind of modal force, from descriptions of subjects' social and physical environments to conclusions regarding the range of concepts these subjects may have at their disposal. Individuals are capable of having the relevant kinds of concepts, and are thus capable of thinking the relevant kinds of thoughts, even under the environmental restrictions that the anti-individualist thought-experiments impose.

⁴ Cf. Burge, "Phenomenality and Reference: Reply to Loar" (in M. Hahn and B. Ramberg, eds., *Reflections and Replies: Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 438.

⁵ Cf. Burge, "Concepts, Definitions, and Meanings" (reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*), p. 291; "Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference," p. 308.

⁶ A small specification: my discussion will center on a particular subclass of what linguists call lexical concepts, namely concepts that denote *social kinds*, e.g., *contract*, *symphony*, *democracy*, and (surprisingly to some) *arthritis*. I believe my arguments have significant potential for generalization beyond this class of cases, but will not pursue that possibility here. Further, we will follow Burge in thinking of concepts as Fregean *Sinne*, or at least as standing in one-to-one relations with Fregean *Sinne*. Thus, concepts are *modes of presentation* of objects, where "objects" is to be construed as a logical category, encompassing events, states, processes, properties, classes of objects, and much else in addition to ordinary physical objects.

This leads us to the paper's second and more ambitious task (section III), which is to show that even if the inference from environments to concepts were sound (or if there were some way to supplement the premises so as to non-trivially yield the desired conclusion), the anti-individualist would still not have secured any relevant or interesting version of the conclusion that this subject would thereby lack the ability to think *C*-thoughts. The sense of inability which we will now have ascribed to the counterfactual subject is a peculiar and inconsequential sense – what, following Aristotle's discussion in *Metaphysics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 3, I will call a *merely Megarian sense of inability*.⁷ The problem is that the Megarian sense of inability is restricted to synchronic applications – applied to the present case, all it can tell us is that we could not consistently find that someone is thinking a *C*-thought *at the same time* as we say that he lacks the *C*-concept.⁸ But this has no bearing whatsoever on what, for instance, he is capable of doing the very next moment. As Aristotle rightly observed, this restricted synchronic sense of ability and inability is not one that we should hold much stock by. Certainly, it is not a sense of ability and inability which should pull much weight in descriptions of the cognitive lives of rational animals. Proper and substantive ability-talk is inherently diachronic: yet, as I will argue, no diachronic ability-claims follow from Burge's stipulation that the counterfactual subject lacks the *arthritis*-concept at some time *t*.

In terms of the proper diachronic sense of ability, it will turn out (section IV) that the conclusion of the anti-individualist thought-experiment is in fact false: the counterfactual subject has the ability to think *C*-thoughts after all, in spite of the fact that he lacks the *C*-concept. This insight receives further support from reflection on the possibility of concept acquisition. Simply put, we have no way of accounting for the acquisition of such concepts

⁷ Translation by W.D. Ross, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Vol. II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁸ This follows trivially from the implied definition of what it is to have a concept: having a concept *C* *just is* having the ability to think *C*-thoughts and *vice versa*.

which would not presuppose the very cognitive abilities that possession of the concept was supposed to explain. In addition to further undermining Burge's argument for anti-individualism, this realization forces (at least) two important emendations to the view that concepts are abilities, which I explore in section V. First, if concepts are abilities, they are a *sui generis* form of ability and should not be assimilated to standard paradigms of such. Much of the present confusion stems from just such overhasty assimilations, particularly concerning the subject's acquisition and first exercise of these abilities. Second, possession of a concept *C* cannot simply be identified with having the ability to think *C*-thoughts (since the counterfactual subject turns out to have the ability even though he does not have the concept); rather, it should be construed as a distinctive (and important) *way* of having that ability.

I Introducing Anti-Individualism

Burge defines anti-individualism as the view that there exist relations of constitutive dependency between the kinds of thoughts a person can think – or types of representational states he can token – and his wider social environment. Absent the relevant enviroing conditions, it would be impossible for a given person to have certain kinds of concepts, and accordingly, impossible for him to think thoughts containing those concepts.

The main pivot of Burge's argument to this conclusion is a thought-experiment proceeding in three steps. In a first step, we are to imagine an otherwise competent speaker of English who utters the sentence "I have arthritis in my thigh." We are to ask, to which attitude is this person giving expression? The thought-experiment is designed to elicit from us the following knee-jerk reaction: it could not be a thought involving our concept *arthritis*, since this concept, by definition, applies only to ailments in the joints. It is assumed here

that someone who in such a way fails to know the meaning of the word ‘arthritis’ (or in object-level terms, someone who does not know what arthritis is) could not be said to possess the concept *arthritis*. Accordingly we would be wrong to ascribe to him a thought containing that concept.⁹

However, this knee-jerk reaction is supposed to crumble in the face of deeper reflection on the case. Our initial inclination belies a peculiar blind spot in our thinking about these matters, which Burge’s argument aims to isolate and contain. This is the idea that *we can only think with concepts we completely understand*.¹⁰ According to Burge, reflection on the finitude of our cognitive powers suggests that, quite probably, very few of us fully master in this sense any significant range of the concepts which nonetheless appear to be at our cognitive disposal. If our thinking were constrained to operate with concepts which we completely understand, then very little thinking would ever take place. In particular, the idea that we can learn from each other and acquire knowledge by testimony appears to require that we be able to say that the doctor and his patient may share the concept *arthritis*, even though the patient’s grasp of this concept is importantly deficient or incomplete.¹¹ If this doctrine of incomplete concept mastery is cogent, then the main obstacle to our asserting that it is indeed our concept *arthritis* that the subject of our thought-experiment is thinking with would seem to simply fall away.

⁹ In other words, this reaction assumes that what Timothy Williamson calls the “paradigmatic way” to possess a concept is in fact the only way to possess a concept. Cf. Williamson, “Understanding and Inference” (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 77(1), 2003, pp. 249-293), p. 250: “As concept possession is usually conceived, a paradigmatic way to have a concept C is to understand a word that means C.”

¹⁰ See, in particular, “Individualism and the Mental,” p. 131. To forestall confusion, I ask the reader to note that where I speak of ‘concepts’, “Individualism and the Mental” frequently speaks of ‘notions’ (defined in “Individualism and the Mental,” p. 102). Burge later switches back to the more widespread nomenclature.

¹¹ Cf. Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” pp. 123, 125-126, 149. For more recent and thorough expositions of this kind of view, see Sanford Goldberg, *Anti-Individualism: Mind and Language, Knowledge and Justification* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Gary Ebbs, *Truth & Words*, ch. 5.

In Step 2 of the thought-experiment we are to imagine an individual who is identical to the subject of Step 1 in all respects but one: this individual is a member of a speech community which classifies rheumatoid ailments differently than does English. There is no word in his language which covers all and only the diseases which are covered by the English word ‘arthritis.’ In this counterfactual language, the word ‘arthritis’ denotes all rheumatoid ailments. Thus, when this individual utters the syntactic string “I have arthritis in my thigh,” he, unlike his counterpart in our community, is saying something which may or may not be true.

Finally, in Step 3 of the thought-experiment we are to ask how, more specifically, we should understand what this counterfactual person is saying, which thought he is expressing with this phrase. Burge’s conclusion is striking: however we are to understand him, we are *not* to understand him as saying or thinking anything that would involve our concept *arthritis*. The reason is simple: he does not have this concept.¹² Burge writes:

In the counterfactual situation, the patient lacks some – probably *all* – of the attitudes commonly [i.e., actually] attributed with content clauses containing ‘arthritis’ in oblique occurrence. He lacks the occurrent thoughts or beliefs that he has arthritis in the thigh, that he has had arthritis for years, that stiffening joints and various sorts of aches are symptoms of arthritis, that his father had arthritis, and so on. (Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” p. 106)

¹² In short, since ‘arthritis’ in our language and ‘arthritis’ in the counterfactual language do not denote the same range of objects, they are not even candidates for expressing the same concept. See Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” p. 106.

In short, all *arthritis*-thoughts are out of cognitive reach of the counterfactual subject, because he lacks the conceptual resources to form such thoughts. He lacks these conceptual resources because there is no such concept in currency in his social environment.¹³

If this conclusion is warranted, it provides what Burge needs in order to establish the truth of anti-individualism. The thought-experiment is designed so that ultimately only the differences in the social environment – in the case at hand, practices of medical classification and the linguistic and epistemic norms they give rise to – could explain why the two individuals are expressing different thought contents when each utters the syntactic string “I have arthritis in my thigh.” This would be sufficient to establish the claim that there are relations of constitutive dependency between the kinds of thoughts an individual can token and his social environment, thus establishing anti-individualism. The counterfactual subject lacks the concept *arthritis* because there is no such concept in currency in his social environment. Lacking the concept, he is incapable of thinking any such thoughts.

¹³ In this sense, Burge’s thought-experiment is often taken to complement the *natural kind externalism* familiar from Hilary Putnam’s “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, 1975) with a parallel thesis about *social kind externalism*. On a standard retelling, the structure of each argument is the same, as would be the force of the conclusion obtained through each argument. I believe this assessment overlooks a fundamental difference between the two arguments, which turns precisely on the role allotted to concepts in each. For it is not their lack of a concept *water* that explains why Twin-Earthlings are unable to think *water*-thoughts, but rather the lack of the substance water in their natural environment to serve as the *res* of their *de re* thoughts. By contrast, there certainly are cases of arthritis in Burge’s counterfactual community (indeed, for all we know, the counterfactual subject might even be afflicted). What explains the counterfactual subject’s alleged inability to think *arthritis*-thoughts, then, is not the absence of arthritis in his natural environment, but rather the absence of the concept *arthritis* in his social environment. Thus, Burge’s argument depends on a particular view of the relation between concepts and abilities of which Putnam’s argument is entirely innocent. For a recent example of this conflation in the literature, see Timothy Williamson, “Sosa on Abilities, Concepts, and Externalism,” (in J. Greco, ed., *Sosa and his Critics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 263-264: “Believing that one is near water is an externalist mental feature. Presumably Twin-Otto fails to believe that he is near water because, unlike Otto, he lacks the concept *water*.” If we will, we can certainly describe Putnam’s problem in terms of concepts, so long as we bear in mind that the reference to concepts pulls no real explanatory weight in the thought-experiment (which is why Williamson’s “because” seems so misplaced). By contrast, the reference to concepts pulls *all* of the explanatory weight in Burge’s thought-experiment.

But right away, we notice a hint of hesitation in Burge's argument concerning exactly what the force of the conclusion is supposed to be. On the one hand, some claims in "Individualism and the Mental" seem to suggest a weaker reading, for instance:

I also do not claim that the fact that our subject lacks the relevant beliefs in the third step follows from the facts that I have described. The point is that it is plausible, and certainly possible, that he would lack those beliefs. (Burge, "Individualism and the Mental," p. 117)

On the other hand, a slew of later statements clearly favor a much stronger reading. For instance:

The arguments center on the point that in the original situation an individual has one set of thoughts, and in the counterfactual situation the individual *cannot have those same thoughts*. (Burge, "Postscript to 'Individualism and the Mental,'" p. 156, my emphasis)

The fundamental reasoning [in "Individualism and the Mental"] concerns *conditions under which one can be in certain sorts of mental states, or have certain concepts*. The intuitions on which the thought experiments rely center on *conditions under which it is possible or impossible to have certain thoughts or perceptions*. (Burge, "Postscript to 'Individualism and the Mental,'" p. 162, my emphases)

The third stage [of the thought experiment] indicates that in such a situation it is *not possible for the individual to have thoughts about arthritis as such*. (Burge, "Postscript to 'Individualism and the Mental,'" p. 162, my emphasis)

The main case [for anti-individualism] is a set of thought-experiments that show that a given person can, under certain circumstances, have a given thought or attitude; but *if certain environmental conditions were different or lacking, a counterpart person could not, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, have that same thought or*

attitude. The point can be seen in terms of concept possession: Given certain background conditions, the individual on earth can have a concept *aluminum* or *arthritis* [...], and the relevant individual on Twin Earth cannot. (Burge, “Phenomenality and Reference: Reply to Loar,” p. 438, first emphasis mine)

The point is not, then, that the counterfactual subject is not, *as a matter of fact*, thinking *arthritis*-thoughts on the occasion in question. Rather, the point is that, given how things stand in his social environment, he *could not be* in possession of the *arthritis*-concept or be thinking any *arthritis*-thoughts. It should be clear that anti-individualism as a metaphysical thesis requires this stronger, modally inflected reading of the conclusion.

But even with that reading assumed, there is still some ambiguity in what is being claimed. What is it that makes for the impossibility? The last quote given above seems clear: absent certain envioning conditions, it would be impossible for the counterfactual subject to think certain kinds of thoughts. “Individualism and the Mental” aims to showcase “the role of social institutions in shaping the individual and the content of his thoughts” (“Individualism and the Mental,” p. 100). In particular, the argument centers on semantic conventions and the epistemic norms they encode. Sometimes, however, Burge pitches the argument directly in terms of concepts instead. Yet these are, we may surmise, not competing forms of explanation, but rather two elements of a single line of thought: outside of a certain kind of environment, an individual could not have a certain concept. Without the concept, he could not think the relevant kinds of thoughts.

Thus, it would appear that a fully fleshed out version of the underlying reasoning would do well to distinguish three elements:

Fig. 1:

[a] Conceptual resources of public language (or social environment)

[b] → [Determine] → Conceptual resources of individual

[c] → [Determine] → Range of thoughts individual is capable of thinking

Our task is now to assess the cogency and plausibility of this general model.

II The Inference from Environment to Concepts

Recall that we are looking for a way to ground anti-individualism's distinctive metaphysical thesis. To that end, let us look first at the transition from [a] to [b] in Fig. 1 above. There are two ways in which one might try to cash out this transition; either (1) in terms of the semantic conventions and lexical structure of the counterfactual language, or (2) in terms of the social epistemic practices that underlie these semantic conventions, and whose norms it is that these conventions encode when all goes well. Both these ways of construing the argument can claim textual support. Regarding (1), we note that Burge's primary source of data is that the term 'arthritis' in the counterfactual language has a different meaning than its English homophone.¹⁴ Moreover, Burge is explicitly concerned to add stipulations to the effect that no other word in the counterfactual language means the same as 'arthritis.'¹⁵ Regarding (2), Burge stipulates that in the counterfactual environment, "[a]rthritis has not been singled out for special mention" in medical theory or practice.¹⁶ Presumably, this is intended to specify that even though the counterfactual subject may entertain thoughts *about*

¹⁴ Cf. "Individualism and the Mental," p. 105, 106.

¹⁵ Cf. "Individualism and the Mental," p. 106.

¹⁶ Cf. "Individualism and the Mental," p. 112; see also *ibid.*, p. 104.

arthritis (*de re*), these will not be thoughts about arthritis “as such.”¹⁷ Obviously, the two possible routes to the conclusion are often intermingled: if arthritis had been singled out for “special mention,” it would presumably have been with the use of a term that would be at least co-extensional with the English term ‘arthritis.’

As I shall argue, however, neither (1) or (2) can secure what Burge’s argument requires, namely a metaphysically necessary inference from social environment to the range of concepts a subject may have at his disposal, and so, further down the line, to the range of thoughts that he is capable of thinking.

Let us look briefly at each in turn, starting with (1), the option that focuses on semantic conventions and the lexical structure of the language. Once this view is made it explicit, it can be dismissed rather swiftly by pointing out that it would commit us to the hyper-Whorfian claim that a person could only have such concepts as there are words to express in his public language.¹⁸ Whatever one’s views on the relation of language to thought more generally,¹⁹ it would be an absurd view of concepts which pinned their existence – or at least, their availability to cognizers – on lexicalization in a public language. Such a view would, for instance, rule out *a priori* that speakers of different languages may share thoughts in areas where the lexical structures of their languages are not completely isomorphic. Arguably, the situation might even be worse: Burge stipulates that the counterfactual community has no word that matches the *extension* of the English word ‘arthritis.’ But it does not follow that a term co-extensional with ‘arthritis’ would in fact

¹⁷ Cf. Burge, “Two Thought Experiments Reviewed” (reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*), p. 184, 189.

¹⁸ Cf. B.L. Whorf, “Science and Linguistics” (reprinted in *Language, Thought, & Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1956). This view would warrant the epithet “hyper-Whorfian” in being significantly stronger than anything that could reasonably be attributed to Whorf himself.

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, Michael Dummett’s controversial view that analytic philosophy is committed to the belief that “first, a philosophical account of thought can be attained through a philosophical account of language, and secondly, that a comprehensive account can only be so obtained” (Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p. 4. There is nothing in this view that would support or even suggest the supposition that a person can only have such concepts as there are words to express in his language.

express the concept *arthritis*. And in fact, by Burge's own Fregean lights, it would seem that a construction such as "rheumatoid inflammation of the joints" (supposing it were co-extensional with "arthritis") would no more express the same concept as "arthritis" than "water" expresses the same concept as "H₂O." This hyper-Whorfian view would thus entail that countless banal truths of English would be not just inexpressible in any other language, but unthinkable to monolingual speakers of those languages.²⁰

Such are the easily ascertainable consequences of the view that differences in the lexical structure of languages entail differences in the range of concepts available to speakers of those languages. We can only speculate as to why so many philosophers are still drawn to this way of stating the thought-experiment. One possibility is that it is the methodology of thought-experiments itself which lets us down here. Maintaining an *a priori* conviction of this sort comes at low cost when we are considering merely hypothetical examples such as Burge's counterfactual community. The conviction is considerably harder to maintain once we realize how many actual languages mirror Burge's counterfactual language in this particular regard: for instance, several Germanic languages, such as German, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish appear to have no term for arthritis as such. It is wildly implausible to hold that this fact alone entails the conclusion that monolingual speakers of these languages must lack the concept *arthritis*. Reflecting on real world examples of lexical incongruence between languages should make us much less confident of the point at stake in Burge's thought-experiment, namely that the counterfactual subject would lack some cognitive ability which the actual subject has merely in virtue of the different lexemes

²⁰ This is a good place to remind ourselves just how few co-extensional terms there are between any two natural languages, let alone how few that would express the same Fregean concept. See, for instance, Kai von Fintel and Lisa Matthewson, "Universals in Semantics" (*The Linguistic Review* 25(2008), pp. 139-201), which claims to find "remarkably few convincing semantic universals" (p. 139) at the lexical level, even as they limit their consideration to candidates for co-extensionality.

available to them in their public languages. The counterfactual subject might lack a particular semantic ability – i.e., the ability to utter sentences expressing propositions taking *arthritis* as a conceptual component – but we would be wrong to infer from this a relevant difference in cognitive ability.

Thus, we can reject the view that facts about the lexical structure of the counterfactual language entail that the counterfactual subject would be unable to think *arthritis*-thoughts, let alone that it would be metaphysically impossible for him to do so. Moreover, we note that Burge himself has more recently sought to distance anti-individualism from this line of thinking, explicitly recanting any strong reliance on suppositions concerning the relation of conventional language to thought.²¹

This leads us to the second way of attempting to cash out the inference from environment to concepts. For what really matters, we may suppose, are not semantic conventions and lexical structure *per se*, but rather the social epistemic practices that underlie these conventions, whose norms these conventions embody and express when all goes well. Looking at the lexical structure of the language might constitute a first-pass epistemic indicator of what concepts are in currency in those practices, but it is no more than that.

But even if we change our focus from linguistic conventions to the epistemic practices that underlie these conventions, we still have no plausible argument to take us directly from environing conditions to the kinds of concepts that a person may have. While this approach avoids the obvious flaws of the linguistic route, it does not manage to shake off the underlying problem. For clearly, someone is capable of having concepts other than

²¹ Cf. “Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind” (reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*), “Postscript to ‘Belief *de re*’” (*op. cit.*), pp. 65-66; “Postscript to ‘Individualism and the Mental’,” pp. 157-162; “Phenomenality and Reference: Reply to Loar,” p. 449*n*3; “Reply to Christopher Gauker” (in M.J. Frapolli and E. Romero, eds., *Meaning, Basic Self-Knowledge, and Mind: Essays on Tyler Burge*, Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2003), pp. 246, 250.

those that have currency in the social epistemic practices that surround him.²² If he is capable of having these concepts even in the absence of these enviroing conditions, then he is capable of thinking the kinds of thoughts in question.²³ The contrary view is plainly undermined by the fact that any social kind concept we have has arisen at some point in history from a social epistemic practice that did not have that concept. We simply have no way of accounting for the historical emergence of these concepts other than by conceding that individuals are capable of developing (and thus of having) other concepts than those that have currency in their social environment.

In fact, the historical emergence of our concept *arthritis* provides a perfect case in point. This concept developed out of a predecessor concept which, like the concept in currency in Burge's counterfactual community, extended to all rheumatoid ailments.²⁴ In this sense, we could view the counterfactual language community simply as a past stage of our own. Clearly, then, members of that language community must have been capable of developing the concept *arthritis*, since, as a matter of historical fact, they did.

I conclude, then, that the official story behind Burge's anti-individualism has come up short: there is no good argument which would take us directly from enviroing conditions to concepts with the metaphysical certainty that anti-individualism requires. Neither an emphasis on the lexical structure of the language nor on the conceptual structure of the underlying epistemic practices will do, since it is plainly possible for the counterfactual subject to have the concept *arthritis* even in the absence of these enviroing factors. Quite

²² We note in passing that several key arguments in Burge's later article "Intellectual Norms and the Foundations of Mind" presuppose exactly this point.

²³ We may also note that even in the presumably favored case of natural kind externalism, the inference from environment to cognitive ability is not as straightforward as many seem to suppose. For instance, presuming that Twin Earth scientists have the concepts *hydrogen* and *oxygen*, why should it be impossible for them to develop the concept H_2O ? (For a parallel line of thought in Burge, see "Other Bodies" (reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*), p. 98n18.)

²⁴ Cf. Morris Longstreth, *Rheumatism, Gout, and Some Allied Disorders* (New York: William Wood and Co., 1882), p. 1.

simply, Burge cannot make induction into a social practice that already has the concept *arthritis* a condition of possibility for acquiring that concept, on pain of making it impossible to account for how anyone could have come to have the concept in the first place. So while it may certainly be true that, ordinarily, most of us acquire our social kind concepts by the agency of our social peers, such interaction cannot be a metaphysical condition of possibility for acquiring any one of these concepts.²⁵

III The Inference from Concepts to Abilities

So far, then, we can conclude that Burge's official story, which claims to take us directly from a description of the counterfactual subject's social environment to a conclusion about the range of concepts that he may have at his disposal, cannot be made good. No matter how empirically robust such a connection might be, it will remain a contingent connection. As such, it cannot support the counterfactuals that Burge's conclusion requires.

But we should not stop here. The fact that we have blocked the transition from [a] to [b] in Fig. 1 above does not mean that we should not have an interest in assessing the transition from [b] to [c] in its own right. For instance, someone might concede the

²⁵ I can think of only one way in which one might even begin to make such a case, namely by treating social kind terms somewhat as Saul Kripke proposes that we treat fictional names (cf. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 157-158). Thus, one might try to argue that just like no one could have beliefs about Sherlock Holmes unless they were causally connected, at however many stages of removal, to Conan Doyle, so no one could have beliefs about arthritis as such unless they were causally connected to our language community and the epistemic practices that underlie it. I doubt that a plausible case can be made for an analogy between fictional names and social kind terms along these lines. What gives the Kripkean treatment of fictional names its plausibility is the fact that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, and so, that no one could have *de re* thoughts about him. By contrast, arthritis does exist, quite independently of any particular conceptual classification. Anyone can have *de re* thoughts about arthritis, as does Burge's counterfactual subject when he wakes one morning and thinks *that is painful*. Treating social kind terms along the lines of fictional names would rule out *a priori* that different (unconnected) social practices could independently develop the same concept *arthritis* (and ditto for other social kind concepts). If this were a sound strategy, then Burge's thought-experiment would no longer need to stipulate that the counterfactual language term "arthritis" has a different extension than our homophone. Co-extensional terms in languages that are lexically isomorphic at every point would serve the thought-experiment just as well, so long as it was stipulated that there had been no interaction between our language community and the counterfactual community.

arguments of the previous section, and still hold that if (contrary to fact) the argument were sound, then the conclusion would be interesting and relevant in precisely the way that anti-individualists contend. Thus, one might suppose that if we had some way of supplementing the premises so as to pave the way for a valid inference to the proposed conclusion, then anti-individualists would have what they need.

In light of this, we should have an interest in assessing the conclusion and its consequences on its own terms. As we shall see, a separate and in many ways deeper problem attaches to the proposed inference from [b] to [c] and to the conclusion that such an inference would allow us to obtain. Even though, on the face of it, the thought-experiment issues in a claim about abilities, it will turn out to be a peculiar and inconsequential sense of ability that is at stake. Reflection reveals that this is not a sense of ability which we should take as being relevant to our descriptions of subjects' cognitive lives more broadly. Thus, even if the argument were sound, its conclusion would not have the exciting consequences it is generally taken to have.

The only kind of ability-claim which can be drawn from an argument of this general form is what, following Aristotle, we may call *a merely Megarian* ability-claim. It is Megarian in the sense that it has only a synchronic application:²⁶ all the anti-individualist thought-experiment could tell us is that we cannot consistently say that someone is thinking a *C*-thought *at the same time* as we say that he lacks the *C*-concept. Construed as an ability-claim, however, this conclusion has all the force and cogency of the Megarians' observation that no one who is standing is capable of sitting. No doubt, there is a sense in which this observation is true (on the supposition that sitting and standing cannot be predicated of a

²⁶ Thus, I am *not* claiming that the anti-individualist position on concepts and abilities is Megarian in the (perhaps more familiar) sense according to which a subject *S* has the ability to Φ only at such times as he is actually exercising that very ability. For a useful perspective on this distinction, see Stephen Makin, "Megarian Possibilities" (*Philosophical Studies* 83(3), 1996), pp. 253-276.

single subject at a single time). But proper ability-talk, as Aristotle rightly points out, has an inherently diachronic dimension: it has to do with the state or position that a person or thing can occupy next. As I will argue, however, were we to try to read a diachronic dimension into the conclusion of the arthritis thought-experiment, then that conclusion would no longer be supported by the argument. In the proper, diachronic sense, the counterfactual subject will have the ability to think *C*-thoughts even though he lacks the *C*-concept.

We can begin by noting that anyone who holds that concepts are abilities will presumably allow that there is a sense in which someone who does not have the concept *C* may still be said to be able to think *C*-thoughts. That is, such a subject might still be *able to acquire* the concept *C*, thereby rendering himself able to think *C*-thoughts. According to Aristotle, “a thing is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity.”²⁷ If this is correct, then we might think that we already have a simple recipe for generating counterexamples to the view that concepts are abilities. For evidently, there is nothing impossible (barring Megarian restrictions) about a subject coming to think *C*-thoughts even though he (now) lacks the *C*-concept.

However, an advocate of the view that concepts are abilities can plausibly retort that Aristotle’s dictum (at least as applied here) misses the importance of the distinction between having the ability to Φ and having the ability to acquire the ability to Φ . Thus, to borrow an example from Gilbert Ryle,²⁸ we might say (truly) of John Doe and Richard Roe alike that he can swim. But these will be relevantly different senses of “can”: John Doe can swim in the sense that he has been taught how to swim, and has not forgotten. Richard Roe can swim only in the sense he is able to learn how to swim. Nonetheless, as Ryle observes: “It would

²⁷ *Metaphysics*, Bk. IX, Ch. 3, 1047a24-25.

²⁸ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (reprint edition, University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 128-129.

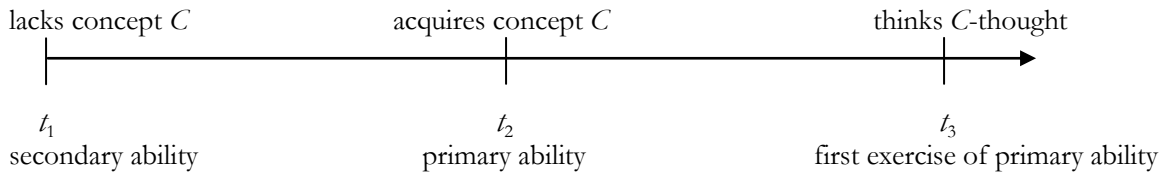
be wrong to predict about [Richard Roe], what it would be right to predict about an idiot, that since he now flounders helplessly in the water, he will still flounder helplessly after he has been given tuition” (Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p. 129). However, even though John Doe and Richard Roe alike satisfy Aristotle’s criterion on abilities, anyone taking a clear-eyed view of the situation will be forced to acknowledge that there is a significant difference between the two cases. I propose that we cash out the difference in terms of a distinction between primary and secondary abilities: John Doe has the ability to swim in the primary sense, whereas Richard Roe has the ability merely in the secondary sense (i.e., he is able, in the normal run of things, to acquire that ability).

Thus, abilities in the secondary sense are not counterexamples at all, but serve rather to bring out the essential line of thought animating the view that concepts are abilities: in order to possess the ability to think *C*-thoughts in the primary and proper sense, the person who lacked the concept *C* would precisely first have to acquire that concept. It is presumed throughout the discussion, and thus not counterexample to such a view, that any rational mature adult may be able to acquire the concept in question, and thus may yet be able to think *C*-thoughts in a secondary sense. The point can be seen in terms of the Fregean dictum that concepts are the constituents of thoughts. Crudely put: if you do not have the concept, then you cannot form any thoughts in which that concept would figure as a constituent. This in no way precludes, however, that you may be able to acquire the concept: then, and only then, will you have the ability to think the kinds of thoughts in question in the proper and primary sense.

This gives us a clue as to how the anti-individualist must construe the diachronic dimension of the claim that concepts are abilities: at some t_1 , the subject does not have the concept *C*, and thus, does not have the ability to think *C*-thoughts. Then, at t_2 , he acquires

the concept, thereby rendering himself able, at t_3 , to think C -thoughts. The crucial point to note is that the subject's acquisition of the concept C must precede his first tokening of a C -thought, lest the distinction between primary and secondary abilities collapse.

Fig. 2:



Plausibly, variations on this schema can cast some light on the acquisition of certain paradigm examples of practical abilities.²⁹ As I will argue, however, it cannot be made good in connection with concepts: in particular, it turns on a notion of *concept acquisition* which we can make neither empirical nor theoretical sense of. Quite simply, we have no way of accounting for a subject's acquisition of such concepts without presupposing the very cognitive abilities that possession of the concept was supposed to explain. On the contrary, subjects must be able to transition directly from not having the concept C to thinking C -thoughts without the interposition of a distinct stage of concept acquisition. On the most favorable reconstruction the anti-individualist can muster, the subject's acquisition of the

²⁹ I have in mind examples like swimming (Ryle) or house-building (Aristotle). All too briefly, what makes for the difference? Paradigm practical abilities such as swimming or house-building are skills which permit of indefinite sharpening, where the cut-off line between mastering the skill and being in the process of acquiring the skill is, while not entirely arbitrary, largely a matter of convention. It is this leeway which permits us to say at some time t , that a subject now has the ability although he has never exercised it. In a real sense, the person who is learning to swim *is swimming* before such time as we shall say that he is a swimmer. However, by convention we call what he does up to that point not an exercise of the ability to swim, but rather steps toward the acquisition of that ability. There is no comparable "period of apprenticeship" for the sorts of cognitive abilities which concepts are supposed to represent. Throughout, we have been assuming, with Burge, that if someone is thinking a C -thought, then he has the C -concept. (For complications, see next footnote.)

concept *C* will be coeval with his first tokening of a *C*-thought.³⁰ It follows that the subject must already have had the ability (and not just in a secondary sense) even though he did not have the concept. Accordingly, we would be wrong to simply identify possession of the concept *C* with the ability to think *C*-thoughts. At best, having the concept *C* will turn out to be a distinctive way of having that ability, but not the only way.

IV The Problem of Concept Acquisition

If this line of thought is correct, then it follows that the anti-individualist would be wrong to conclude from a subject's lacking the concept *C* that he would be incapable of thinking *C*-thoughts. That is, the inference from [b] to [c] is invalid, unless the scope of the ability-operator is restricted to synchronic assessment, in which case it would follow trivially, merely as a matter of unpacking the implied definition of what it is to have a concept.

To see this, we may consider an example: legal scholars point out that there is no term in the French language which expresses the legal concept *self-defense*. The French term closest in meaning to the English 'self-defense' is 'légitime défense,' which applies equally to defense of self and to defense of (non-consenting) others.³¹ Let us take this as an occasion to simply stipulate that at some time t_1 , the French did not have the concept *self-defense*, and

³⁰ Certainly, plausible reconstructions *less* favorable to anti-individualism are not far to seek. One such reconstruction deserves mention. Here, the acquisition of the concept *C* may lag far behind the subject's first tokening of a *C*-thought. It takes not one but several competent tokenings of *C*-thoughts in order to possess the concept *C*. This possibility is worth pointing out because it threatens to undermine the intuitive basis of Burge's doctrine of incomplete concept mastery. For on this view, we are free to attribute *C*-thoughts to some subject without thereby committing ourselves to saying that he has the *C*-concept, just as we can say (see previous footnote) that someone is swimming – or is performing such motions as might otherwise count as swimming – without thereby saying that he has the ability to swim. On this view, the fact that our subject is tokening a thought such as *I have arthritis in my thigh* is no longer decisive evidence that he has the concept *arthritis*, but rather perhaps, evidence against it.

³¹ Cf. George P. Fletcher and Jens David Ohlin, *Defending Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 3. More specifically, the French could certainly apply the concept *légitime défense* to an instance of self-defense, but this is precisely not to think of it *as* self-defense.

so, by Burgean hypothesis, were incapable of thinking thoughts about self-defense as such.³² Yet today they clearly are capable of thinking *self-defense* thoughts, inasmuch as they are knowing and willing signatories, for instance, to the UN Charter, Art. 51 of which crucially involves precisely that concept. So our question now is, how might the French have gone from t_1 , at which point they lacked the *self-defense* concept, and so, by hypothesis, were incapable of thinking *self-defense* thoughts, to some t_{1+n} , at which point they were capable of thinking *self-defense* thoughts, and so, by hypothesis, must have had the *self-defense* concept?

Once the question is spelled out to this level of detail, it is easy to see where the problem lies with the temporal schema laid out in Fig. 2. For this schema leaves us with no good account of *concept acquisition*, that crucial step which would explain the transition from t_1 to t_3 . We have no way of accounting for a subject's acquisition of a concept except through the attribution of one or more of just the kinds of thoughts which, according to the current theory, possession of the concept was supposed to explain the subject's ability with. Simply put, one cannot acquire a concept except by instantiating it in thought.

Concepts, on Burge's view, are ways of thinking about objects.³³ How, then, might one go about acquiring a concept? As stated, the question might be too broad to permit an illuminating answer. We may fare better by considering specific instances: thus, for instance, one might acquire the concept *self-defense* by learning that attacks upon oneself gives one certain legal prerogatives that one does not get from attacks upon anyone else. Similarly, one might acquire the concept *arthritis* by learning that certain occurrences of rheumatism in

³² Note that this is pure stipulation intended to get our minds properly fixed on the relation between concepts and cognitive abilities, and by no means signals a residual adherence to the view discarded above, viz. that a person can only have such concepts as there are words in his language to express. Indeed, as I will argue shortly, the French *now* possess the concept *self-defense* even as they still do not have a lexical item which refers to it uniquely.

³³ Where again, "objects" is in no way restricted to concrete particulars, but also encompasses events, states, processes, properties, classes of objects, and much else besides.

the joints have etiological peculiarities not shared by other instances of rheumatism.³⁴ But these are precisely thoughts which embody or express the way of thinking in question. Quite generally, by the time we should say that someone has acquired the concept *C*, he will already be deeply involved in thinking *C*-thoughts. On the most favorable reconstruction the anti-individualist can muster, the acquisition of a concept *C* will be coeval with the subject's first tokening of a *C*-thought. Evidently, then, the subject was able to think *C*-thoughts at t_1 , even though he did not (already) possess the concept *C*. Accordingly, possession of the concept *C* cannot simply be equated with the ability to think *C*-thoughts, nor will lack of the concept entail the corresponding inability, since this would leave us bereft of the means to say how he ever came to token a *C*-thought in the first place.

On the picture that is now emerging, a person's acquiring a concept *C* coincides with that person's first coming to think *C*-thoughts. By contrast, it is quite misleading to picture concept acquisition as the acquisition of some kind of pure psychological capacity or module which yet lies unexercised, as Fig. 2 invites us to do.³⁵ But this is the only picture of concept acquisition which would support the conclusion that a subject who has not (yet) acquired the concept *C* does not (yet) have the ability to think *C*-thoughts.

In defense of his conclusion that the counterfactual subject would be unable to think *arthritis*-thoughts, Burge writes that "it is hard to see how [he] could have picked up the notion of arthritis" ("Individualism and the Mental," p. 106). But in fact, there is nothing mysterious about how he might acquire the concept *arthritis* or of how the French acquired the concept *self-defense*. They simply actualized abilities which they already had by coming to

³⁴ In view of the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery, of course, there need be no particular set of true beliefs (or inferential dispositions) that someone must acquire in order to have acquired a concept *C*. But this provides no comfort for the anti-individualist here. For presumably no one could acquire the concept *C* without acquiring *some* true beliefs about *C*. Let these true beliefs now be the *C*-thoughts which marked his acquisition of the *C*-concept.

³⁵ For a related line of thought in Burge, see "Individualism and the Mental," p. 107*n*1.

think of certain objects (actions, events, etc.) in certain ways. By contrast, it certainly would be “hard to see” how the counterfactual subject could have acquired the concept *arthritis* if the acquisition of that concept depended on learning a word that means ‘arthritis.’ But if that were the case, it would be *really* hard – indeed, impossible – to see how anyone came to acquire this concept in the first place. To be sure, there might be a difference in the mechanism by which the actual subject and the counterfactual subject first came to acquire the concept *arthritis*. The actual speaker might have acquired it by learning the conventional meaning of a term in the English language. That route is not available to the counterfactual speaker, who might instead have acquired it by reflecting on the etiological peculiarities of occurrences of rheumatism in the joints. But in neither case would it be correct to say that the acquisition of the concept preceded the first tokening of the relevant kinds of thoughts. Learning the meanings of words involves learning about things. Even when we acquire concepts by word learning, we do so by instantiating them in thoughts.

V Towards a Better Model of Concepts and Abilities

There remains to deal with one source of worry, namely that this line of argument will entail the loss of any meaningful distinction between having and not having a particular concept.

I believe the worry is unfounded. Even though having the concept *C* cannot simply be equated with having the ability to think *C*-thoughts, it can still be rightly counted as a distinctive and psychologically important *way* of having that ability. To see how, consider two persons *A* and *B*. *A* has a long history of thinking *C*-thoughts, whereas *B* has never tokened a *C*-thought in his life. We find it natural to say that *A* has the concept *C* whereas *B* does not. Nonetheless, as I have argued, we would be wrong to infer that *A* has the ability

to think *C*-thoughts whereas B does not. Rather, they each possess that ability but in distinctive ways. A, we might say, has a *local* (or *modular*) ability, which can manifest itself in the following way: he can conjure *C*-thoughts, for instance, simply by recalling them from semantic memory, and without engaging his rational capacities on a broader scale. Depending on the particularities of the concept in question, he might also have an entry in his cognitive lexicon which expresses that concept uniquely.³⁶ These are among the ways in which *C*-thoughts are immediately accessible to A, facilitated by his previous history with such thoughts. This local (or modular) ability is what I propose that we call “having the concept *C*.”

But B, too, has the ability to think *C*-thoughts, even though he has never exercised that ability. We must acknowledge this, for B might simply be A at some earlier point in time, and as we have seen, without granting him that ability we would be at a loss to explain how he ever came to acquire the concept in the first place. So, A and B alike have the ability to think *C*-thoughts. But the way in which they possess the ability is importantly different. B’s ability, we might say, is of a *discursive* sort. He is, we presume, a rational being of mature capacities, possessed of language. He can draw on background knowledge, experience, intuition, imagination, perceptual happenstance, and all the other resources that people draw on when they come up with new ways of thinking about things: now he is thinking *C*-thoughts. *Now* we may say that he has the *C*-concept. But we would be quite wrong to insist that he must have somehow acquired that concept in the steps leading up to his first exercise of that ability.

Finally, we might think that A’s and B’s ways of accessing *C*-thoughts are sufficiently different, and that the difference is of sufficient psychological relevance, that we would be

³⁶ This, though, is by no means a necessary condition, as my argument in section II shows.

warranted in thinking of them as different abilities altogether. Thus, A does, after all, have an ability that B does not; moreover, the difference is rooted in the fact that A has the concept whereas B does not. Certainly, this is correct as far as it goes. But it matters how we individuate abilities, and with this move, we will have changed the subject of discussion altogether. Throughout, the focal point of our discussion has been subjects' ability to think *C*-thoughts. Both A and B have this ability, even if they can only exercise that ability by way of different cognitive mechanisms. If A's mechanism for exercise strikes us as significant enough to warrant being called a distinct ability, then the ability we are now contemplating is no longer correctly specified as the ability to think *C*-thoughts *simpliciter*, but rather as the ability to think *C*-thoughts by way of whatever mechanism we fasten on, for instance, semantic memory. But to point out that B lacks *this* ability has none of the consequences that are usually taken to flow from Burge's argument for anti-individualism.³⁷

VI Conclusion

In sum, I argued in section II that Burge's official argument, which proposes to carry us with a certain kind of modal force from a description of the counterfactual subject's social environment to a conclusion regarding what concepts he can have at his disposal, is not sound. Neither an emphasis on the lexical structure of the counterfactual language nor on the conceptual structure of the underlying epistemic practices can secure what Burge's argument requires. It follows that the arthritis thought-experiment fails to provide support for anti-individualism as a metaphysical thesis about "conditions under which one can be in

³⁷ Moreover, once we start individuating abilities along these lines, it is suddenly an open question whether we should say that any two people whom we might ordinarily think of as having the same concept *arthritis* (e.g., the doctor and the patient suffering from incomplete concept mastery) also have the same cognitive ability. In other words, abilities will now be individuated on a much finer grain than we are capable of individuating lexical concepts. This again would jeopardize the basis of the doctrine of incomplete concept mastery.

certain sorts of mental states, or have certain concepts” (Burge, “Postscript to ‘Individualism and the Mental’,” p. 162).

In section III, the ante was upped considerably. Here I argued that even if the argument were sound, the conclusion itself would be uninteresting. The conclusion would be warranted only if it were restricted to a synchronic, Megarian reading: we cannot consistently say that the counterfactual subject is thinking *arthritis*-thoughts at the same time as we say that he lacks the *arthritis*-concept. By contrast, once we take a proper, diachronic view of abilities, it no longer follows that someone who lacks the concept *C* will be unable to think *C*-thoughts. This finding is supported by reflection on the possibility of concept acquisition (section IV). We simply have no way of accounting for the acquisition of such concepts which would not presuppose the very cognitive abilities that possession of the concept was supposed to explain. Instead, the correct view is that a subject acquires the concept in and through a first exercise of the relevant cognitive abilities, abilities which, accordingly, the subject must already have had even though he did not have the concept.

Two consequences follow from this argument (section V). First, if concepts are abilities, they are a *sui generis* form of ability and should not be assimilated to standard paradigms of such. Much of the present confusion stems from just such assimilations, particularly concerning the subject’s acquisition and first exercise of these abilities. Second, possession of a concept *C* cannot simply be identified with having the ability to think *C*-thoughts, but should rather be construed as a distinctive (and important) *way* of having that ability.