

# Perfect Thinkers, Perfect Speakers and Internalism about Thought Content

Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova\*

Received: 12 December 2022 / Revised: 15 August 2023 / Accepted: 12 September 2023

*Abstract:* In the following paper I propose an argument against internalism about thought content. After a brief preview of the recent debate between Sarah Sawyer and Åsa Wikforss, the paper outlines the central issue in their discussion. I show that, even if Wikforss' objections against Sawyer are granted, externalism about thought content can still prevail. For my argument, I use Wikforss' own objection against externalism and show how, if accepted, it binds one to the mythical figure of the perfect speaker – an infallible creature that possesses complete understanding of all of her concepts.

*Keywords:* Externalism; thought content; concept mastery; understanding; perfect speakers.


## 1. Introduction

Internalism about thought content (ITC) is the claim that the contents of our thought are internally individuated and not constituted by external factors. In this paper, I examine the debate between Sarah

---

\* Sofia University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5961-0327>

 Department of Philosophy, Sofia University, 115 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd, Sofia, Bulgaria

 [m.angelova-elchinova@phls.uni-sofia.bg](mailto:m.angelova-elchinova@phls.uni-sofia.bg)

Sawyer and Åsa Wikforss, aiming to show that even if all the arguments of an internalist like Wikforss are accepted and all her points made against Sara Sawyer are indeed granted, ITC is still a flawed thesis. Thus, my argument also presents an indirect defence of Externalism about Thought Content (ETC). However, instead of defending social externalism like the one championed by Tyler Burge (at least in his early works, for example Burge (1979)), I am taking a different approach by pronouncing myself in favour of Sarah Sawyer`s (2003, 2021) broad physical externalism. I am going to take the easy way by raising a rather modest, negative claim instead of a positive, more radical one – rather than arguing that ETC provides the only good explanation of concept possession or present arguments establishing ETC as the correct approach, I only demonstrate why internalism is unacceptable. The problem with ITC, as per my reconstruction of Wikforss` position, is that it begets the mythical figure of the perfect thinker (corresponding to a perfect speaker) - a creature that possesses infallible knowledge about how to employ the concepts it operates with<sup>1</sup>. I hope to show that even if Wikforss` argument against Sawyer stands and externalism suggests that we possess incomplete understanding about our thoughts, that should not be a problem, because (usually) we have nothing in common with such creatures like the perfect speaker.

Section 1 serves as a preliminary section where I provide a reconstruction of Burge`s initial externalist claims and outline a clear-cut distinction between social externalism and broad physical externalism. I will start by making some introductory remarks about thought content and concept possession in general and then move to Burge`s Arthritis scenario.

In Section 2, I am going to provide an overview of the debate between Wikforss and Sawyer. I will be more concerned with granting Wikforss` arguments than with reviewing Sawyer`s replies as, while I am clearly an open sympathizer of Sawyer`s position, I still want to present the most

---

<sup>1</sup> If one is not too fond of the usage of the term ‘knowledge how’ here, it can be replaced by ‘some cognitive ability’ – that will not influence the central argument in any way.

charitable interpretation of the internalist's charges against broad physical externalism.

In Section 3, I will even grant that the main accusation made by Wikforss in regards to ETC is completely on-point - hidden in the articulation of ETC, there is indeed a tacit requirement to endorse the possibility of incomplete understanding of our own thoughts. Further, I show that the internalist alternative presumes that we adopt a Concept Mastery condition (CM) for concept possession. I examine different possible interpretations of CM and discuss possible ways to detect conceptual errors.

Finally, in Section 4 I build my argument by showing why it should be acceptable that one does not possess complete understanding of her own thoughts. The ITC alternative seems much more unpalatable, because by introducing CM, it also presupposes that we are perfect thinkers (corresponding to perfect speakers). I conclude by analysing the unreasonable implications of CM. I compare them to the implications of granting that partial understanding may be sufficient for attributions of concept-possession.

## 2. The content of a thought and the possession of a concept

It is unclear enough what our thoughts are supposed to be, but when it comes to their contents, things really start to look ambiguous. Tyler Burge makes some key points about the semantical foundations of the ITC vs ETC debate. The expression "thought content" can be regarded (non-strictly speaking) as synonymous to "mental content" or even to "conceptual content".

Before I introduce the basic definitions in the debate between holders of ITC and supporters of ETC, I would like to adopt two premises. First, I shall consider that thoughts have (at least some) sentential expression<sup>2</sup>. It

---

<sup>2</sup> A legitimate worry about my presumption can be that it presupposes externalism from the start. One can argue, that if thoughts can (always) receive sentential expression it looks like they always conform to some social meaning. Davidson raises a similar objection against Burge, insisting that what we mean and think is not

would be hard to imagine that thoughts can be examined “on their own”, that is – without referring to any linguistic equivalents. For example, when dealing with the problem of conceptual truths, Williamson makes the following assumptions: a) concepts are the constitutive elements of thoughts, b) “to grasp a thought is to entertain it” (Williamson 2006, 2) and c) thoughts are expressed via sentences (ibid, 9: footnote 9). Thus, in Williamson’s case, the analysis of conceptual truths is done as an analysis of their sentential expressions as public linguistic elements. Following a similar approach, the second premise that I adopt can be formulated as follows: Public access to the content of a thought is provided (in principle) by its sentential expression<sup>3</sup>. I suppose that both premises are pretty straightforward and their admittance should not present a problem<sup>4</sup>.

A short reconstruction of Burge’s key points made in relation to the nature of thought content is also in order, as the definitions provided by him can be regarded as widely accepted and, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, they are the same definitions as the ones used by Wikforss and Sawyer.

Thought contents can be characterised as obliquely occurrent expressions in sentential that clauses (or content clauses) (Burge 1979, 76), e.g. Maddy believes *that* Earth is round. As Burge himself points out, the

---

necessarily determined by the linguistic habits of those around us (1987, 448). Thus, thoughts can still have “narrow contents”, which are internally individuated. I would like to thank Johan Heemskerk for pointing this out to me. The problem is that such internalism will face namely the dilemma Wikforss wants to avoid: giving up on reference or rejecting the communitarian conclusions, thus accepting conceptual and referential fragmentation (for Wikforss’ own worries about the internalist dilemma see 2001, 217-218; for her worries about Davidson’s answer to Burge see 2001, 227).

<sup>3</sup> The first premise can be regarded as more general because it suggests which background theory of thinking I am adopting. Whilst the second premise is implied by the first, I still consider it different as it informs the reader about the particular way in which I am employing the expression “thought content”.

<sup>4</sup> The adoption of such premises can seem to imply that conceptual mastery is related to linguistic mastery. Unlike the premises themselves, this conclusion may give rise to a very strong objection. In Section 4, I address some worries that may spur from the relation between concept possession and linguistic expression.

terminology employed by him is one that he borrows from “the mentalistic discourse” (“the intentional discourse”). Thus, thought contents are presupposed to possess representational (intentional) character and to reflect one’s epistemic perspective<sup>5</sup> (Ibid.). More importantly, it is presumed that in cases where extensional differences between two obliquely occurring counterpart expressions in that clauses are presented, we can examine them as describing two different mental states or events (Burge 1979, 77). The tacit presumption (as it will become clear from the Sawyer/ Wikforss debate) is that the difference between two mental states originates from a difference in their reference. Finally, as it is broadly accepted that the content of a thought can be regarded as constituted by concepts<sup>6</sup>, the remaining pages are going to deal directly with concept possession and conceptual content.

Now, moving to the ITC vs ETC debate, a well-articulated general suggestion on how to distinguish internalists from externalists with regards to a property K, is laid out by Mark Rowlands, Joe Lau and Max Deutsch:

In its most general formulation, *externalism* with regard to a property K is a thesis about how K is individuated. It says that whether a creature has K or not depends in part on facts about how the creature is related to its external environment. (...)

*Individualism or internalism* with respect to a property K says that whether a creature has K or not supervenes on its intrinsic properties only. It follows that facts about the environment play no role in determining whether or not the creature has property K. (Rowlands, Lau and Deutsch 2020).

In his Arthritis case, Burge uses the same criterion to show that thought content is not completely determined by one’s intrinsic properties. He

---

<sup>5</sup> The presumption that there is an intimate relation between thought contents and epistemic perspective provides yet another reason why we must take heed of the problems surrounding individualism as they have important implications for general debates in epistemology (e.g. issues about the nature and possibility of a priori knowledge).

<sup>6</sup> Burge prefers to talk about “notions”, because this term is more isolated from theoretical commitments. In my paper, I go with the more traditional one - “concepts”.

invites us to imagine a scenario with two individuals – let’s call them Bert and his Counterpart – that are identical in every important aspect which concerns their ‘inner life’ (viz. mental states, desires, propositional attitudes) as well as their hard-wired neurological setting and all of their neural processes (Burge 1979, 77-78). Burge also makes the important clarification that both Bert’s and Counterpart’s disposition to assent to the proposition  $p = I \text{ have arthritis in the thigh}$  is caused by the same processes and can be traced to the same factors (ibid, 78). By introducing a difference in their external, social environment, Burge suggests that even if they are intrinsically indistinguishable, they possess different thought content. While Bert’s proposition  $p$  is false, his identical counterpart’s proposition  $p$  is, nevertheless, true<sup>7</sup>. The only difference between Bert and Counterpart lies in their social environment. Bert shares our social environment where ‘arthritis’ does not apply to ailments outside the joints. As a result, his belief that  $p$  is false. In Counterpart’s environment, “physicians, lexicographers, and informed laymen apply ‘arthritis’ not only to arthritis but to various other rheumatoid ailments” (Burge 1979, 78). As a result, Counterpart’s belief that  $p$  is true.

The view defended by Burge in “Individualism and the mental” (1979) is usually called ‘social externalism’ and it can be considered pivotal for ETC theories. However, a more recent defence of ETC, which is properly constructed as ‘broad physical externalism’ is presented by Sarah Sawyer. The difference between these two variations of ETC can be summarized as follows:

**Social Externalism (SE)** [Burge in IM (1979)]: The individuation of mental states or events and the forming of corresponding propositional attitudes is dependent on one’s social environment (Burge 1979, 84-85; Sawyer 1993, 265; Wikforss 2001, 217).

**Broad Physical Externalism (BPE)**<sup>8</sup> [Burge in his later works and Sawyer]: Two individuals A and B can be physically identical while having different mental states and this difference is not instantiated by

---

<sup>7</sup> Propositions expressing thought content always possess fixed truth values, e.g. two identical propositions with different truth values also express different thought contents.

<sup>8</sup> Sawyer also refers to this position as “natural kind externalism” (Sawyer 2015).

anything in their ‘mental’ life but is dependent on their environment, which is broadly construed as a physical environment (Burge 1986, 708; Sawyer 2003, 272).

There can be important differences with regards to the possible implications of SE and BPE, which I will not present in detail here. As far as the argument that I propose is one favouring Sawyer’s claims in the debate against Wikforss, maybe it is more precise to say that it is an argument that favours BPE. However, I do not see any obvious reason why the argument presented in Section 3 should not be applicable to versions of SE.

What further divides ETC from ITC<sup>9</sup> are views about what constitutes concept possession. All participants in the debate seem to agree that in order for S to entertain a thought T, S has to possess understanding of the constituting (in regards to T) concept C. What they do not agree upon is whether such understanding should be immaculate. I am going to use a distinction between degrees of understanding introduced by Gabriel Rabin (2020) to illustrate the disagreement between ITC and ETC supporters. According to Rabin, *concept possession* is what allows an individual to entertain a particular thought containing this concept (Rabin 2020, 627). For example, to be able to think that one has hands, S has to possess the concept C = HANDS. However, if S grasps and applies C correctly on any occasion, then we can say that S possesses full understanding of C. In such cases we can ascribe *concept mastery* of C to S (ibid, 627-628). Going further, concept possession can either coincide with concept mastery or it can allow for partial or incomplete understanding.

The question whether concept mastery is necessary for concept possession has become an apple of discord between holders of ITC and ETC. While externalists insist that a subject S’s partial understanding (incomplete mastery) of a concept C can and, on many occasions, does present a sufficient condition to ascribe concept possession of C to S (Burge 1979: 83-84), internalists contend that only concept mastery will suffice<sup>10</sup>. One way

---

<sup>9</sup> The disagreement in question would be especially applicable to the debate between Wikforss and Sawyer.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Sawyer (2003) actually argues that SE does not need to rest on incomplete understanding or the possibility of a conceptual error. To strengthen the position of

to go about settling issues regarding the nature of thought-content is to focus on our ability to apply and grasp concepts. Thus, the cornerstone of my argument will be a) to examine what exactly is required for concept possession and b) to settle on the most viable interpretation of the concept mastery condition and show its implausibility.

### 3. Incomplete understanding

In the previous section, I argued that in order to pick a side in the debate between ITC and ETC one should gain awareness of rival interpretations of the requirement for concept possession. In this section, I provide an overview of the debate between Åsa Wikforss and Sarah Sawyer. As I read it, the bedrock of their discussion is exactly their disagreement about what constitutes concept possession. A careful look into Wikforss' objections against ETC allows one to infer the following central accusation: The defence of SE (and BPE by extension) depends on i) the condition that in Burge's example, Bert/Counterpart makes a conceptual error and ii) on the acceptance of the notion of incomplete understanding (Wikforss 2001, 2004). Wikforss insinuates that it is strange to suppose that we do not understand our own thoughts. Partial understanding looks like a necessary presupposition in regards to ETC (Wikforss 2004, 287). In Burge's wider (i.e. broad physical) externalism, the "incompleteness" becomes even more "radical and pervasive"<sup>11</sup> (Wikforss 2004, 294).

---

the internalist, I will presume that her argument fails and that externalism does require cases of partial understanding to count as cases of concept possession.

<sup>11</sup> The idea that full understanding of our thoughts seems natural and intuitive spurs from the same assumption that Williamson discusses in "Cognitive homelessness" – namely, that nothing in our mind nor in "the realm of philosophy" remains hidden from us (Williamson 1996, 554). It is quite natural that ITC supporters are also inclined towards accepting Descartes's presumptions about our "cognitive mobile homes" without hesitation. However, the readily adopted claim that all of us have such cognitive structures which remain open to us at all times turns out to be quite problematic (ibid) (for a rebuttal of Williamson's anti-luminosity see Berker 2008).



Wikforss does not give any particular reason in support of her claim that the notion of incomplete understanding is unfeasible, nor does she provide any justification to support the idea that concept mastery is required for conceptual understanding. It is left to the reader to reach to the same conclusions by relying on her intuition or common sense. And while it may be true that on account of our *prima facie* intuitions incomplete understanding of our own thoughts sounds unreasonable, I am going to show that the alternative is far more unsatisfactory. One more thing that is somehow left to the reader is how to interpret the concept mastery (full understanding) condition. While all parties in the debate provide some insight into what is involved in partial/incomplete understanding and why it should/should not be regarded as sufficient for concept possession, nothing much is said regarding the more rigid requirement. That is why a careful examination of possible interpretations of the concept mastery condition will follow in Section 3.

Before engaging in clarification of the notion of concept mastery, let's first examine some of the key points in the debate made by Wikforss and Sawyer. In regards to Wikforss's objection that ETC invokes the concept of incomplete understanding, the answer provided by Sawyer which looks most promising is that "the unifying principle of externalism" does not require that a subject S would still be able to grasp a concept C in cases where S has only incomplete understanding about C. A characteristic of all versions of ETC is rather the acceptance of the claim that concepts are not only individuated by a subject's psychological states, e.g. by what the subject thinks is true of a given referent, but, also, by the referent itself<sup>12</sup> (Sawyer 2003: 272). Such principle can be regarded as "a unifying principle of reference" (UPR) and reformulated as follows: "*a difference in reference (extension) implies a difference in concepts*" (Wikforss 2004: 290).

Turning to Sawyer's appeal to the unifying principle of reference, Wikforss raises the objection that depending on how we construe UPR, it is either false or begging the central question (Ibid. 291). She goes on to show,

---

<sup>12</sup> Sawyer's answer provides a straightforward explanation of why such theories are 'externalist'. Referents are understood not as determined by one's individual psychological processes but as elements of some independent reality.

using Burge's Sofa case<sup>13</sup>, that on the first interpretation of UPR a term can have different extension without that implying a difference in concepts. For example, on this interpretation the extension of 'sofa' can be different (we can imagine a possible world where all sofas are made of leather) while the meaning of 'sofa' remains exactly the same.

On the other hand, on the second interpretation of UPR, our term 'sofa' would not apply to objects in the counterfactual situation, because they will not fall into the extension of 'sofa' in our world (i.e. they will not *be sofas*). Interpreted like that, UPR is true but it commits one to a type of externalism presupposing that incomplete understanding is sufficient for concept possession, namely – reference externalism. It is crucial to see precisely how Wikforss' objection is spelled out, as it will prove central for my own argument:

“Construed in the first way, the principle [M.A. UPR] is false, since there are many possible worlds in which our term 'sofa' has a different extension without thereby expressing a different concept. Construed in the second way, the principle is true, and can be used to defend the move from reference externalism to content externalism, but not to support reference externalism in the first place. To make a case for the claim that our term 'sofa' does not apply to the objects in B's world, considerations of a quite different kind are required. The question, then, is **whether these considerations will commit the externalist to the assumption of incomplete understanding**<sup>14</sup>.” (Wikforss 2004, 292)

The point made by Wikforss is that even if UPR can indeed justify the move from reference to content externalism (i.e. to ETC), the grounding of

---

<sup>13</sup> The Sofa case aims again to establish that thought contents cannot be individuated simply qua psychological (internal) processes by arguing that two physically indistinguishable subjects – A and B - can have different mental contents and that therefore mental content is externally individuated (for an excellent reconstruction of the Sofa case see Sawyer 2003: 267-268).

<sup>14</sup> I have intentionally put the last part of the objection in bolded text and I would urge the reader to keep in mind that Wikforss considers incomplete understanding as the sole failure of ETC.

ETC on reference externalism is exactly what requires the defender of ETC to accept the assumption of incomplete understanding<sup>15</sup>. For the sake of simplicity, let's call this argument The Argument from Incomplete Understanding (AIU). There is a way to rephrase AIU to make its elements clearer:

AIU

- P1: The unifying principle of reference can be used to justify the transition from externalism in regards of reference to ETC.
- P2: Arguments in favour of externalism in regards of reference often rely on cases where a subject S possesses only incomplete understanding about a concept C.
- C1: ETC would also require that we allow for concept possession in cases of incomplete understanding.
- P3: It is unacceptable (or a demonstration of “radical and pervasive” incompleteness<sup>16</sup>) to suggest that we do not understand our own thoughts.
- C2: The main claim of ETC is false.

The approach preferred by Sawyer (2018) is seemingly to reject C1 by showing that it fails to account for the fact that there are nonrepresentational relations among the content of S's thoughts and some objective properties in her wider physical reality<sup>17</sup> (Sawyer 2018, 5). I, on the other hand would like to propose a different line of defence for ETC. I intend to show that even if premises P1 and P2 are to be accepted and even if the conclusion

---

<sup>15</sup> When Sawyer argues that the unifying principle of externalism is the principle of reference, she somehow tries to detach her views from those explicitly expressed by Burge, who insists that we can ascribe to S a possession of a concept C even in cases where S has only partial or incomplete understanding about C (Burge 1979, 79).

<sup>16</sup> I appeal again to the exact wording which is used by Wikforss (2004, 294).

<sup>17</sup> Another example that suggests Sawyer's withdrawal from C1 can be found in her introductory paper on “Internalism and Externalism in Mind”. There, she draws an explicit distinction between Burge's early SE and the one endorsed by her during the debate with Wikforss (BPE) based on the fact that only SE obliges one to accept incomplete understanding as plausible (Sawyer 2015, 135-137).

C1 in AIU is indeed true, the conclusion C2 would still be false. I consider P3 to be the weak link in AIU. It turns out that even if we imagine that Wikforss is right about almost everything and Sawyer is wrong<sup>18</sup>, even if externalism does depend on the concept of incomplete understanding, one can simply argue that this is not a problem.

Before arguing in favour of the possibility of incomplete understanding, it is crucial to set the stakes more clearly by examining how the notions of concept mastery and complete understanding can and should be interpreted.

#### 4. Concept mastery

I have argued so far that in order to decide if ITC or ETC fares better in providing an explanation of content-individuation, we should determine what is required for concept possession. I submit that a rejoinder to Wikforss' main challenge to ETC can use her own argument against her by showing that incomplete understanding of our own thoughts and conceptual error are indeed possible. By accepting C1 of Wikforss' argument, the only thing that one has to do in order to salvage externalism is to show that P3 is false.

A careful look into Wikforss' argument allows one to see that if the claim expressed by P3 turns out to be false, then the first portion of AIU can serve a reverse purpose as an argument in favour of ETC. Let me explain what I mean by that. If it turns out that there is not a general problem with the ascription of concept possession to individuals who do not completely understand a concept, then (by Wikforss' own admission) incomplete understanding can be used to "support reference externalism in the first place" (Wikforss 2004, 292). However, as Wikforss admits, if reference externalism is supported by something different than the unifying principle, then the principle can be true (as insinuated by P1), and can "be used to defend the move from reference externalism to content externalism" (ibid).

---

<sup>18</sup> I do not consider Sawyer's claims misguided, on the contrary – I am a great sympathizer of her ideas. However, I think that there is a better approach to Wikforss' challenge.

Therefore, a reasonable rejection of P3 would not only undermine individualism but, also, it will turn AIU into a strong defence of ETC.

In her effort to show that incomplete understanding is not enough for concept possession (which is at the heart of P3), Wikforss implicitly adopts the opposite premise which will be designated as ‘The Concept Mastery’ (CM) condition:

**CM:** We can ascribe a possession of a concept *C* to *S* if and only if *S* has full understanding about *C* (i.e. only in cases where concept mastery is presented).

Apart from appealing to a strong intuition, P3 does little work in providing a legitimate worry against ETC. However, when it comes to a philosophical dilemma, a strong intuition cannot just be ignored. Therefore, in the remaining pages of this paper I will try to show why P3 may seem intuitive, but also why it is wrong. To do that, first I have to find the most viable interpretation of the CM that gives the best possible chances for Wikforss’ argument to stand.

A difficulty for interpreting concept mastery is that while Burge, Wikforss and Sawyer do provide useful insight into what they mean by ‘partial’ or ‘incomplete’ understanding, very few remarks have been made when it comes to full understanding or concept mastery. Therefore, the construal of a good interpretation of CM will have to make use of the notion of incomplete understanding in order to infer what full understanding stands for.

A second difficulty arises in regards to how to detect concept mastery or concept possession or, in other words, which linguistic expressions of content-states signal appropriate concept possession<sup>19</sup>. On numerous occasions, Burge suggests that subjects in the Arthritis case and the Sofa case have “incomplete linguistic understanding” or “incomplete mastery of terms” but nonetheless can be regarded as possessing the relevant concepts (e.g. Burge 1979, 80; 1986, 708). He even suggests that a good portion of our beliefs (e.g. beliefs about what beef brisket is) are “infected by

---

<sup>19</sup> As it will transpire in Section 4, another important question will be which linguistic expressions indicate conceptual error and which correspond merely to a linguistic error.

incomplete understanding”, but that does not necessarily imply that we lack conceptual competence (Burge 1979, 79-80).

The parallels between incomplete linguistic understanding and lack of concept mastery suggest one possible way to interpret the notion of concept mastery:

Accepted Usage construal (CM): S possesses a concept C if and only if S uses the linguistic expression L corresponding to C correctly or in accordance with the conventional meaning of L on any occasion<sup>20</sup>.

Unfortunately, the Accepted Usage construal of CM is extremely implausible, not only because a) it gives rise to a Strawman argument against ITC by representing individualism as a very easy target, but also b) because of a discrepancy with some of Burge’s central claims. In the same paper where Burge seems to encourage such a construal (see Burge 1986), he also draws an important distinction between cognitive value (potential information units) and conventional meaning corresponding to “the gap between accepted usage and belief” (Ibid, 214). Thus, subjects satisfying the CM condition cannot just be regarded as impeccable players in a language game<sup>21</sup>.

Another way to interpret concept mastery is suggested by Burge’s criticism of the Cartesian interpretation of privileged access in “Individualism and the mental”. When arguing that authority of one’s reports about their thought contents applies to cases of incomplete understanding, he suggests that ITC presupposes some “special intellectual vision of the contents of (...) thoughts and beliefs” (1979, 116). Such an interpretation is further supported by Wikforss’s reading of conceptual error as a failure of the individual to grasp conceptual connections (2004, 294). CM forbids conceptual errors which allows us to conjecture that not only conceptual contents, but also conceptual connections should be *transparent*.

---

<sup>20</sup> Some passages in Burge’s work seem to suggest a similar construal (see Wikforss 2001, 224). On one of the very few occasions where he examines concept mastery (that is “full understanding of cognitive value” on his terminology), he describes it as “normally not distinct from ideal understanding of ordinary usage and meaning” (Burge 1986, 718).

<sup>21</sup> Wikforss’s examination of Burge’s Sofa case provides a detailed argument prohibiting the Accepted Usage construal (Wikforss 2004: 293-294)

On this interpretation, CM presents a very rigid restriction – full understanding of the conceptual contents constituting a thought *T* is a precondition for *thinking* and rationality<sup>22</sup>:

**Strong (Positive) Interpretation (CM)** – S possesses a concept C if and only if the content of C and all conceptual relations in which C is a relatum/relata are luminous for S<sup>23</sup>.

But would the internalist, particularly Wikforss, accept such a strong construal? It is immediately evident that understood in this way CM is regressive and that full understanding would require thoughts about thoughts<sup>24</sup>. Further, the strong interpretation is open to various lines of argument, most notably Burge's own remarks about unconscious possession of concepts (1979, 105) and variations of Williamson's (1996, 2000) anti-luminosity argument. More importantly, Wikforss never explicitly appeals to privileged access or mentions *awareness* of conceptual contents. Therefore, we can conclude that the Strong reading of CM is too uncharitable.

One remaining option is to treat the CM condition as a negative requirement. As Wikforss insist on multiple occasions, AIU stresses that ascriptions of concept possession presuppose that we are *not* in a possession of our own, deviant concepts (2001, 231), we are *not* failing at grasping important conceptual connections and we are *not* "rejecting trivial analyticities"<sup>25</sup>:

---

<sup>22</sup> cf. "Failure to grasp one's mental contents results from either blind prejudice or interference by "mere" bodily sensations and corporeal imagery." (Burge 1979: 104)

<sup>23</sup> Berker's interpretation of Williamson's anti-luminosity argument clearly shows that luminous conditions refer to "a kind of epistemic privileged access"

<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer who suggested to me that this interpretation is too strong and uncharitable.

<sup>25</sup> Wikforss seems to suggest that cases of conceptual error are either "radical and deep-running" disagreements in meaning, but not in beliefs and rejections of trivial analyticities (2001, 231). Characterised like that however, CM is begging the question, because it leaves very little space for the possibility of conceptual error (e.g. trivial cases like "brisket" or radical examples like the Sofa case are neither disagreements in meaning nor they concern a trivial analyticity).

**Weak (Negative) Interpretation (CM)** – S possess a concept C if and only if, when it comes to C, S is a) unable to commit conceptual error and b) C is not a deviant concept.

Weak CM still involves one rigid restriction: if we grant that S possesses C, that amounts to granting that it is impossible that S ever makes a conceptual error in regards to C. In order to avoid circularity, we need a clear answer of what constitutes a conceptual error and how to detect it.

First, a conceptual error suggests partial grasp of a concept. However, we are looking for construal of such partial grasp in terms different from the ones provided by the Accepted-usage and the Strong interpretation. Further, we want partial *grasp* to reflect incomplete *understanding*<sup>26</sup>. The proper way to go, then, is to present conceptual competence in terms of ability. As suggested by Sawyer, “the subject’s grasp of a concept is tied to the ability to apply this concept correctly” (2003, 271). Here, “correctly” designates “in terms of reference” (e.g. Burge 1986, 715, Wikforss 2001, 23). Thus, incomplete understanding/partial grasp presupposes “an ability to discriminate some but not all Fs from non-Fs typically” (Sawyer 2003, 271).

The aforementioned clarifications allow for a final, positive twist on the Weak interpretation of the CM condition:

**Ability Interpretation (CM):** S possess a concept C if and only if S possesses infallible knowledge how (or some other cognitive ability) to employ C correctly<sup>27</sup>.

It is important to stress out that on the Ability interpretation, CM does not involve a Luminosity condition – the contents of one’s thoughts and concepts need not be transparent and readily accessible (at least not in a reflective manner). One satisfies the condition if one employs their concepts

---

<sup>26</sup> The reason for that is quite obvious. While Wikforss holds that “a linguistic mistake is not a conceptual mistake” (2001, 230), she insists on concepts being related to meaning as public and shared (c.f. her argument against Davidson in Wikforss 2001: 227)

<sup>27</sup> Note that S does not need to be aware of this ability and can even consider they lack such ability. At the end of the day, if CM is true, then it should also apply to people like Burge and Sawyer who do not find it “transparent”.



correctly and avoids conceptual errors, but one may yet be unable to determine when they satisfy the CM condition.

In the next section, I am going to argue that – put this way – CM is false. Now that the question about how to interpret concept mastery is settled, only one important clarification remains: we still have to precisify how to detect cases of conceptual error or how to determine if one possess such infallible knowledge how to employ a concept. I propose that we think of full understanding as a *discrimination* ability in terms of reference (per Sawyer’s proposal). Such interpretation is further plausible, because it is permitted (and even implied) by P2 in AIU. If Wikforss’ suggestion is that externalism in regards of reference requires incomplete understanding to be a viable option, then on her own, internalist account, the CM condition should also regard meaning in terms of reference. After all, Wikforss’ own claim is that her argument from incomplete understanding can vindicate internalism “without having to accept conceptual and referential fragmentation”<sup>28</sup> (2001, 218).

## 5. Perfect thinkers and perfect speakers

Now, I turn to the question: what if externalists can ‘bite the bullet’ and show that the commitment to incomplete understanding is a reasonable price to pay. I remind the reader yet again that in P1 of AIU Wikforss stipulates that if reference externalism is supported by something different than the unifying principle, then the principle can be true and can ground the move from reference externalism to ETC. Thus, if the CM condition embedded in P3 turns out to be false, AIU is actually giving us good reasons to endorse ETC.

In my argument against AIU, I use *reductio ad absurdum* stipulating that it would suffice to show how the adoption of the CM condition comes with unacceptable implications<sup>29</sup>. I am going to do this by suggesting that

---

<sup>28</sup> If the argument was not aimed at rejecting the dilemma in front of the internalist, it would not have drawn attention to begin with.

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that the CM requirement is not merely an idealisation which is supposed to show how real conceptual possession should look. CM is not a

the notion of concept mastery begets the mythical figure of the perfect speaker (as an extension of the perfect thinker). To allow that there are people or, which seems even more radical, that all people are such as to satisfy the CM condition, means to allow that they are creatures who possess infallible knowledge about how to employ the concepts they operate with. However, each concept they operate with is part of their thought content, which in turn is expressed via language. Therefore, our ‘infallible connoisseurs’ would also be perfect speakers due to their ability to use a linguistic expression L correctly on any occasion on account of their full understanding of a concept C which corresponds to said L<sup>30</sup>. In other words, if we can ascribe concept mastery to S in regards to, say, the concept MEAT, that means a) that S is incapable of making a conceptual error when it comes to MEAT and b) that under normal conditions<sup>31</sup> S is going to use the corresponding linguistic expression “meat” correctly (in terms of reference) in every sentence uttered by her.

One may object that such conclusion oversimplifies the matter and that making a linguistic error does not amount to making a conceptual error, nor does concept mastery presupposes linguistic mastery.<sup>32</sup> This objection deserves attention and calls for some additional argument in favour of the relation between concept possession and sentential expression of concepts. First, I admit that a linguistic error on its own does not guarantee that one

---

normative condition in the sense that it does not just set the bar for how concept possession should be, but it rather suggests that concept possession really works like that.

<sup>30</sup> Let’s take the concept PLATIPUS. The Ability interpretation of CM is compatible with S having false beliefs containing the concept PLATIPUS, e.g. S may falsely believe that there is an angry platypus under the bed. What Ability-CM is incompatible with, is S making false judgments about the concept PLATIPUS and its referent – the natural kind platypus, say that platypuses do not produce venom. Wikforss’s argument allows this restriction, because she sustains that conceptual disagreements are disagreements where we share a lot of common beliefs about e.g. arthritis, but we fail to converge upon some of our beliefs about ARTRITIS (Wikforss 2001, 231).

<sup>31</sup> “Under normal conditions” is meant to exclude cases of purely linguistic error. In what follows I will provide further clarifications.

<sup>32</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer who pointed this out to me.

has not mastered the concept in question. There can be many explanations of why someone makes a linguistic error, for example the infamous lapsus linguae. Purely linguistic errors can also include cases of false beliefs about a term's application, e.g. Burge's subject who believed he had orangutans for breakfast (Burge 1979, 90-91; Wikforss 2001, 231). Particular types of linguistic error may also be due to a serious condition like dyslexia. Recent findings report dyslexia to be primarily related to a word identification problem due to issues with phonological processing, which nevertheless do not to presuppose comprehension failure (e.g. Casalis 2004).

Thus, there are indeed cases where linguistic error is not related to conceptual error. On the other hand, there are cases where conceptual error is made, but no (literally understood) linguistic error is presented. Let's look at an example:

**Dolphins:** Let's imagine that 10-year-old Martha loves dolphins. She goes to the Dolphinarium regularly where she observes the habits of the dolphins, swims with them regularly and feeds them fish. Martha has a variety of true beliefs with content-clauses involving oblique occurrences of DOLPHIN. For example: that dolphins are highly intelligent, that dolphins can swim, that dolphins eat fish and that dolphins produce a variety of vocalizations. Let's further imagine that Martha engages in a discussion with Peter who asks her which is her favourite fish. Martha answers the following:

S1: Dolphins are my favourite fish.

Are we to attribute possession of the concept DOLPHIN to Martha? I would say that we are. Now, according to the CM condition this would be a clear example of conceptual error and it would suggest that Martha has only partial understanding. Furthermore, there is no obvious linguistic error in S1.

One can wonder, does not this make the case against my assumption that concept possession is related to linguistic expression even stronger? My answer will be 'No, because that is a Strawman type of argument'. I insisted that CM implies that one has *to use* the corresponding linguistic expression e.g., "dolphin", *correctly* (in terms of reference) in every sentence uttered by her. That does not mean that she cannot make a *purely* linguistic error

in the sense of lapsus linguae or even in the sense of dyslexia, nor in any sense that concerns language rules or even accepted usage of expressions alone. Martha's error is one that concerns the meaning of "dolphin" in terms of reference, her belief that dolphins are fish is a mistaken belief *about* the concept DOLPHIN<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, all that will be presumed by my perfect speakers charge is that such creatures have to be infallible in regards to *linguistic meaning*<sup>34</sup> (understood in the abovementioned way). All of the abovementioned examples show only that there is no necessary relation between concept possession and (literally understood) sentential expression. What they failed to show is that there is no relation between concept possession and sentential expression (understood in terms of meaning) and, also, that there is any other way to assess concept possession other than analysis of sentential expressions. If conceptual error was never presented in sentential expressions, there would be no way to pick it up. However, such presentation does not presuppose any *purely* linguistic error, only a reference error.

An internalist (mind you, one who's views are much closer to those of Davidson rather than those of Wikforss) may stipulate that Martha has a DOLPHIN-like concept, and she was correct with respect to that concept: her concept, whatever it included, was consistent with dolphins being fish<sup>35</sup>. On this view, concepts are literally *individuated* and pertain solely to a given individual<sup>36</sup>. Thus, Martha ends up in possession of the concept

---

<sup>33</sup> One can object that Martha's error is rather a factual error. I do not deny that. Even so, it is also a conceptual error, at least per everything that we can gather from Wikforss's interpretation of conceptual error. Martha does not have a deviant DOLPHIN concept, nor does she make a purely linguistic error.

<sup>34</sup> That is, for the corresponding linguistic expressions of concepts they are in possession of. Imperfectness would be possible, but it would suggest that in all such cases CM does not hold and that possession of the relevant concept cannot be attributed to S.

<sup>35</sup> I would like to thank Johan Heemskerk for suggesting this line of defence on behalf of the internalist.

<sup>36</sup> The scope of this paper does not allow that I dive into the metaphysics of concept in detail. My initial response to a naturalistic charge presuming that concepts are not abstract entities is that I agree with it. I even consider externalism to be far

FOLPHIN and we can grant that she mastered the concept FOLPHIN. I share Wikforss` s scepticism that this line of argument does not do much good to the internalist. To paraphrase: If whenever two speakers disagree about the classification of dolphins it follows that they must have `different thoughts`, then it is hard to see how two speakers could ever share any thoughts at all<sup>37</sup>. That would preclude us to share any concepts or disagree over our beliefs (Wikforss 2001, 227).

It is an open question if one is ready to attribute concept possession to Martha in the Dolphin case. While I am ready to do so, many would find that Ability-CM holds for Dolphin and would deny that Martha possesses the relevant concept. However, Dolphin is not meant to present a direct challenge of Ability-CM. The example`s main purpose was to illustrate a common case of conceptual error. Martha is purposefully depicted as a child who, even if indeed infatuated with dolphins, is not an expert in any way and does not employ her DOLPHIN concept flawlessly. But is it possible that a lot of us are much more like Martha than we are ready to admit?

Going further with the argument against the CM condition, the first problem that it faces is that it is too rigid. We should allow that there are competent subjects who are capable of conceptual errors. Let`s take the following example:

**Substitute:** Let`s assume that Mike is a chef and works at a restaurant that mostly serves grill and barbeque. He possesses a large number of beliefs, which are commonly attributed with content clauses containing `grilled chicken` in oblique occurrence. At this stage we can probably say that, as an expert and reliable user of the expression `grilled chicken`, Mike also seems to possess the concept GRILLED CHICKEN which corresponds to `grilled chicken`. However, imagine that Mike has a friend

---

more capable to incorporate a naturalistic view on concepts than internalism, e.g. Sawyer`s natural-kind externalism (2015).

<sup>37</sup> Further, another worry is that DOLPHIN-like concepts are a slippery slope, until you realize it, you have a million different concepts for a dolphin and none of them is DOLPHIN, because there is no concept DOLPHIN anymore. Getting rid of reference may fend off the problems raised by Putnam, Burge and etc., but what does it leave us with? That is why I agree with Wikforss that a Davidsonian solution is a non-starter.

named Judith. One night, Mike goes to diner in Judith`s house. Unbeknownst to Mike, Judith has prepared a dish containing only soya chunks and vegetables. While eating his dish, Mike utters the sentence *s1*: “I think that this is the best grilled chicken I ever tasted”. Should we suspend our initial judgment and deny Mike the possession of the concept GRILLED CHICKEN?

I contend that examples like Substitute are a useful demonstration of why we should restrain from a foolhardy acceptance of the CM condition. Clearly there are instances in which we would usually ascribe concept possession (i.e. we would also suppose that partial understanding is sufficient) even if, due to unforeseen circumstances, upon occasion S makes a conceptual error. Just like Bert in Burge`s example, Mike makes such a conceptual error expressed in *s1* by forming a false belief *about* grilled chicken.

But why should we presuppose that Mike is making a conceptual and not simply an empirical error? Remember that Ability-CM presupposes that we should interpret full understanding as a discrimination ability. In Substitute, Mike fails to discriminate something that is F (where F = grilled chicken) from something that is non-F (in this case – grilled soya chunks). We can generalize the example by presuming that Mike has never heard of soya chunks. Let`s further presume that Judith tells all of her and Mike`s mutual friends what happened at dinner, and they decide to pull an elaborate deception by deluding Mike into thinking that soya chunks are actually a premium kind of chicken. As a result, he starts to serve soya chunks in his restaurant and forms new false beliefs *about* roasted chicken. For example, that roasted chicken should be soaked before cooking, or that roasted chicken should be rehydrated before grilling. On the other hand, it would be strange to suggest that Mike has a deviant concept of roasted chicken, because he still possesses all his previous true beliefs about ‘roasted chicken’ and successfully discriminates things that are roasted chickens from all things that are not soya chunks<sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>38</sup> I think something similar happens in Burge`s brisket example – one`s social environment can shape one`s BRISKET concept in a way that allows only for partial understanding.

At this point, an internalist can question my argument on grounds of it being too strong. After all, it can be argued that Substitute relies on perceptual illusion or that it involves a convincing fake. From there, an internalist can generalise the rebuttal saying that Ability-CM would deny us possession of perceptual concepts because we can stipulate that all perceptual experiences can be convincingly faked<sup>39</sup>. From there, the internalist can argue that a feasible option is to reinterpret Ability-CM as an even weaker condition, namely:

**Ability CM\*:** S possess a concept C if and only if S possesses infallible knowledge how (or some other cognitive ability) to employ C correctly relativised to non-deceptive cases.

Such an interpretation of CM would be more plausible, if it was indeed available for the internalist. First, one has to take into account that other forms of internalism (e.g. internalism about knowledge or justification) have been having notoriously hard times dealing with the indistinguishability of good and bad cases<sup>40</sup>. The reason for that is that such differences do not reside nowhere near the mental. Further, Ability CM\* only confirms that by introducing the condition that infallibility should be regarded as relative to non-deceptive cases. However, excluding convincing fakes requires an external, environmental restriction on Ability CM that is not at the internalist's disposal.

The presumed phenomenal indistinguishability of the good and the bad case is just another reason why internalists should find a way around Substitute. If there is any internally accessible difference between Mike in the convincing fake scenario and his counterpart, Mike\* who is not presented

---

<sup>39</sup> This line of defence was suggested to me by Johan Heemskerk. I would like to stress out that the plausibility of the argument will depend on the particular views about perceptual contents that the internalist is ready to endorse. However, I will not discuss this in detail here.

<sup>40</sup> Take BIV cases, on an internalist account Jane and JaneBIV have the exact same justification for believing that they have hands (for an excellent reconstruction of Cohen's 'new evil demon problem' see Srinivasan 2020, 406-407).

with a fake, but enjoys grilled chicken, the internalist has to account for that<sup>41</sup>.

A further challenge for Ability-CM was already raised by Burge's Arthritis case. It is not clear if, however we interpret it, a CM condition would allow for lack of scientific knowledge about the referent of the concept in question. Even if we find a way around Substitute, Mike may still reject "a trivial analyticity"<sup>42</sup> about CHICKEN, like  $p = \text{"Chicken is gallus domesticus"}$ . Mike would probably also fail to understand sentences like  $s_2$  "There is a gallus domesticus inside this dish". However, a zoologist can say that the linguistic expression 'gallus domesticus' still corresponds to the concept CHICKEN. Thus, the CM condition raises the question if Ability-CM does not also require too vast knowledge *about* a particular concept, its referent and its linguistic use.

To deny concept possession to Mike in either in these two scenarios would mean to deny it to too many subjects on too many occasions. Individualists are afraid that allowing incomplete understanding would imply that one does not understand her own thoughts. It turns out that the endorsement of ITC and the acceptance of the CM condition are actually what implies such a conclusion - Mike neither understands his thoughts (because according to CM he does not possess the concept ROASTED CHICKEN) nor he understands what he is saying. Therefore, holders of ITC should defend themselves against the same charge that they have put forward. It seems that we are not perfect thinkers, nor perfect speakers and, if ITC is indeed

---

<sup>41</sup> Insisting that Ability CM is too strong because it introduces a discrimination ability will also not work, at least not for Wikforss' project. After all, she refuses to take the 'narrow content' way out of Burge's challenge in order to not sever the traditional link between thought-content and truth-conditions and to avoid the fragmentation of concept and reference (Wikforss 2001, 218). Other traditional internalist criteria for correctness like consistency with one's other beliefs will also not be applicable because, while they would secure that conceptual content is determined individualistically, they would still create a chasm between concepts and referents. As I agree with all of Wikforss' criticisms of traditional internalist responses to Burge, I will have nothing more to say about them.

<sup>42</sup> Which I remind, according to Wikforss, would be exemplary of conceptual error (2001, 231).



correct, it seems that we actually fail to possess a lot of the concepts we operate with.

At this point, as pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer, an internalist can object against Substitute by suggesting that Mike does not make a *competence* error, but a *performance error*. Such distinction would imply that a performance error is due to the external conditions in which the judgment is produced and that it does not require that Mike revises his ROASTED CHICKEN concept. If he was to make a competence error on the other hand, it would be related to his conceptual grasp of ROASTED CHICKEN and it would have suggested conceptual revision after Mike accepts that he made a mistake.

The answer to the internalist's objection consists of two parts. First, it is not clear at all that Mike is not expected to make a revision in regards to his ROASTED CHICKEN concept. Maybe he will adopt at least one new belief regarded to ROASTED CHICKEN, namely that roasted chickens are not the only thing that taste *like that*. If, before trying Judith's dish, he held the belief that a necessary and sufficient condition for something to be a ROASTED CHICKEN is to *taste like that*, then he probably would abandon this belief after trying the soya chunks (if we presume that Judith does inform him of the nature of his dish). Should not we suppose then that he has actually revised his ROASTED CHICKEN concept? Further, an all-out distinction between competence errors and performance errors may prove unavailing for the internalist. As I pointed out there can be cases of performance error where no competence error has been made. However, it is questionable if we can discuss *pure* competence errors without the presence of performance errors. After all, it is Bert's performance error in the Arthritis case that motivates Wikforss to suggest that he does not possess the concept ARTHRITIS. In Wikforss' own words: "Bert makes a conceptual error *when he utters* 'I have arthritis in my thigh'" (2004, 288).

The final problem encountered by Ability-CM concerns conceptual disagreement<sup>43</sup>. If all subjects possess full understanding about the concepts they operate with and are, indeed, such perfect speakers, then how *can* we

---

<sup>43</sup> Wikforss is actually fully aware of that (2001, 227), but does not seem to provide a remedy to it apart from the appeal to individualists to not give up on reference and to not accept the conceptual and referential fragmentation (Ibid., 218, 226, 231)

account for instances where misunderstanding or disagreement arises? It looks like Wikforss' suggestion is that all conceptual differences appear, in the end, to be nothing more than differences in adopted theories (e.g. the actual and counterfactual theory of what 'arthritis' refers to in Burge's scenario) and not actual conceptual errors (Sawyer 2003, 270). However, if to be able to grasp a concept C, S has to satisfy the CM condition (Sawyer 2003, 273) the emerging figure of the perfect speaker will oblige the individualist to explain why no one ever makes a conceptual error<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, if every disagreement spurs from a difference of theories, and every theory has a chance to be proven correct in the future (Wikforss 2001, 225), ITC turns out to be enfolded in arbitrariness and relativity. It would be very difficult to point out clear cut criteria which should be adopted to distinguish true from false claims in an argument. Each attempt to outline such criteria would require that both sides in the argument talk about the same thing (i.e. grasp the same concept) and that according to said criteria one of the speakers is right and one of them is wrong.

Finally, even if I am right that Ability-CM suggests that concept possession requires that we are perfect thinkers, there may yet be a reader who remains unpersuaded by my arguments that such a condition has to imply that we are also perfect speakers. I would like to address this worry one last time and try to sway this reader to agree with me. While there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between conceptual and linguistic errors, as I already admitted above, a couple of things should be pointed out about conceptual errors<sup>45</sup>: i) A conceptual error may not be *merely* a performance error, but it *is* a performance error (of a sort)<sup>46</sup>; ii) evaluation and assessment of performance errors requires that the one who is being evaluated *performs*; iii) in the case of concept possession a performer is manifesting their ability *qua* the use of language. Thus, we may not be required to

---

<sup>44</sup> Either that, or in all cases of disagreement we should deny concept possession to both sides of the argument. However, this takes us back to my first objection because it seems that very few individuals would turn out to grasp any concepts at all.

<sup>45</sup> That is: about conceptual errors on an internalist account that endorses Ability-CM (see footnote 37 for a different problem with a different brand of internalism.)

<sup>46</sup> Remember that Ability CM requires correct application and infallible discrimination.

be perfect speakers in a loose sense (we are allowed to make purely linguistic errors), but we are required to be ones in a more strict and troubling sense (we are not allowed to apply the *word* ‘arthritis’ to ailments of the thigh). Avoiding the Davidsonian solution comes with a cost: bringing back reference suggests bringing back meaning, which in turn demands enforcing a (contingent) conceptual - linguistic relation.

All objections that were outlined above have the same consequence – even if incomplete understanding seems counterintuitive at first glance, to assume the opposite, expressed by the CM condition, comes with a heavy price to pay. ITC implies that we are perfect thinkers and perfect speakers and that, when we enter disagreement, we just talk about different things and follow different theories. On the other hand, the only implication of ETC and the rejection of P3 is that sometimes we are capable of ‘losing the keys to our cognitive home’ (so to say). Even if this is counterintuitive, no real arguments which are able to affirm that concept mastery is a necessary condition for grasping a concept were presented by the holders of ITC.

The rejection of P3 comes with an interesting consequence. Let’s reassess AIU and see what follows from the negation of the CM condition:

AIU (Redacted)

- P1: The unifying principle of reference can be used to justify the transition from externalism in regards of reference to ETC.
- P2: Arguments in favour of externalism in regards of reference often rely on cases where a subject S possesses only incomplete understanding about a concept C.
- C1: ETC would also require that we allow for concept possession in cases of incomplete understanding.
- P3: It is possible that there are cases where we do not completely understand our own thoughts.
- C2: The possibility of incomplete understanding can be used to ground reference externalism.
- C3: The unifying principle of reference can be used to ground ETC.

As per Wikforss’ own admission, the premise that incomplete understanding about our own concepts is possible grounds reference externalism. I showed that reference externalism is supported by something different than the

unifying principle, thus the principle can be true, and can “be used to defend the move from reference externalism to content externalism” (Wikforss 2004, 292). Therefore, per the redaction of Wikforss’ own argument, ETC is well-grounded and immune to individualists’ attacks.

### Funding

My research was funded by the "Sofia University Marking Momentum for Innovation and Technological Transfer" (SUMMIT) project and I would like to express my gratitude for that.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Rosen Lutskanov, Johan Heemskerk, Dimitar Elchinov and two anonymous reviewers for all their interesting and important comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

### References

- Berker, Selim. 2008. “Luminosity Regained.” *Philosophers` Imprint* 8 (2): 1–22, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0008.002> (accessed July, 22 2023).
- Burge, Tyler. 1979. “Individualism and the Mental.” *Midwest studies in philosophy* 4 (1): 73–121, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1979.tb00374.x>
- Burge, Tyler. 1986. “Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind.” *Journal of Philosophy* 83: 697–720, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026694>
- Casalis, Séverine. 2004. “The concept of dyslexia”. In *Handbook of Children`s Literacy*, edited by T. Nunes & P. Bryant, 257–73. Springer Dordrecht, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1731-1\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-1731-1_15)
- Davidson, Donald. 1987. “Knowing one’s Mind”. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 60 (3), 441–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3131782>
- Rabin, Gabriel. 2020. “Toward a Theory of Concept Mastery: The Recognition View.” *Erkenntnis* 85 (3), 627–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-018-0040-6>
- Rowland, Mark, Lau, Joe & Deutsch, Max. 2020. “Externalism about the mind.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, Last updated December 10, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/content-externalism/>
- Sawyer, Sarah. 2003. “Conceptual Errors and Social Externalism.” *Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (211), 265–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.00311>

- Sawyer, Sarah. 2015. "Internalism and Externalism in Mind." In *The Bloomsbury Companion to Philosophy of Mind*, edited by J. Garvey, 133–50. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. DOI: 10.5040/9781474244480.ch-007
- Sawyer, Sarah. 2018. "Subjective Externalism." *Theoria* 84 (1), 4–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12137>
- Sawyer, Sarah. 2021. "Concepts, Conceptions and Self-Knowledge." *Erkenntnis*, 86, 237–54, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-019-00109-2>
- Srinivasan, Amia. 2020. "Radical Externalism." *Philosophical Review*, 129 (3), 395–431, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-8311261>
- Wikforss, Åsa. 2001. "Social Externalism and Conceptual Errors." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (203), 217–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0031-8094.2001.00225.x>
- Wikforss, Åsa. 2004. "Externalism and Incomplete Understanding." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (215), 287–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0031-8094.2004.00352.x>
- Williamson, Timothy. 1996. "Cognitive Homelessness." *The Journal of Philosophy* 93 (11), 554–73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2941049>
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. "*Knowledge and Its Limits*." New York: Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/019925656X.003.0012>
- Williamson, Timothy. 2016. "Abductive philosophy." *Philosophical Forum* 47 (3–4), 263–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12122>