Heady Stuff: Joseph Mendola's Anti-Externalism

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The externalism that is the target of Joseph Mendola's bracing *Anti-Externalism* is, of course, the family of views according to which sensory, perceptual and propositional content—mental content generally—is constitutively dependent on relations to the broader environment—natural and social. The view, as its advocates often note, is not that mental states are somehow not "in the head," located in the environment, but rather that such determinately contentful mental states are akin to artifacts or biological organs: a carburetor or kidney is constituted by particular stuff, and that stuff is located here or there. But, that something is a carburetor or a kidney is something that is constitutively dependent on a broader automotive or biological economy (Burge, 2003, 435). Still, however one puts it, Mendola will have none of it. Indeed, one gets a good sense of the polemical trajectory of the book on the second page, where he writes, "[i]n one dark or golden age, perhaps only Hegel was an externalist. But now almost everyone is. This is a mistake. Externalism is false. Internalism is true. Or so I will argue."

If the work is ambitious—and it is—it should be said, from the start, that *Anti-Externalism* is certainly the most developed, sustained, and astute critical investigation of externalism about mental content and, just as notably, defense of internalism (or narrow content) that we currently have available. It is an elegant work—one that both demands and rewards careful attention. It should be noted, as well, that, at times, it seems as if nearly every matter of more than passing interest in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language during the past few decades is taken up in the volume. No doubt, that's a symptom of the profound manner in which the internalism/externalism divide has insinuated its way into nearly every corner of the discipline; but it is also, I think, a symptom of Mendola's keenness (one might even say of a compulsive variety) to pursue externalist assumptions and theories wherever they may be encountered in the terrain of contemporary philosophy.

The organizational scheme of the book is worthy of mention. Mendola begins with careful characterizations and diagnoses of the various externalist or

anti-individualist thought experiments (those of Putnam, Burge and Kripke). Only after he has developed his own internalist replies to those cases does he go on to consider the various ways in which externalism takes form in theories of mind and language. That is important, it seems to me, not least because the chief support for externalism is just the intuitions elicited from the cases. It's just compellingly clear, or so it seems, that the appropriate subject in an H_2O-less but XYZ-rich environment doesn't have water thoughts, doesn't share thoughts with you and me. In much the same way, Tyler Burge's Twin Bert doesn't have arthritis thoughts. How could he? *That* concept, *our* concept, arthritis, isn't even available to him—or so it seems. Another benefit of Mendola's scheme of first replying to the cases is that he's able to develop an account of narrow content that he then fills out drawing on ("hijacking," as he occasionally puts it) internalist versions of sophisticated externalist machinery throughout the remainder of the volume. It is a very effective strategy.

Mendola's internalist alternative to an externalist picture is qualia empiricism. On such a view mental content is fundamentally and crucially founded in sensory contents and sensory contents just are internally determinate qualitative aspects of our experience. This will, no doubt, have a familiar Lockean and, perhaps, even clunky, shopworn ring. And it is true that, for Mendola, mental content is grounded centrally not in socially-constituted linguistic meaning or in information à la familiar causal accounts of content, but, again, in those internally determinate sensory contents. We really are trying to show how it is that we can have thoughts about the world from the inside-out, as it were. Still, this isn't your grandfather's empiricism. As he puts it, "[t]raditional empiricism was not only a theory about mental content, but about evidence and confirmation … But qualia empiricism has a different form … qualia don't constitute evidence for perceptual beliefs but rather something like truth conditions" (8). The ingenuity with which Mendola develops this picture is more than a little impressive. There are three elements to this qualia empiricism: (1) Rigidified Description Clusters (RDC), Mendola's response to the famous externalist cases; (2) Modal Structuralism (MS), Mendola's positive account of internally determinate sensory content; and, (3), Non-Epistemic Internalism (NEI), which is Mendola's effort to show, I suppose, how it all comes together and how, in particular, the spare semantic materials of MS can make good the robust requirements of RDC. Mendola develops NEI in Chapter 10 and it is there that he displays how it is that his account differs from other similar accounts, notably, one offered by David Chalmers (314-24). The difference that makes all the difference, if I follow, is precisely the way in which Mendola's empiricism is non-epistemic in the way noted above.

Mendola's reply to the externalist cases is, then, RDC—a version of metalinguistic and rigidified description accounts. In a nutshell, it's held that "there is a set of properties that is constituted by the internally determinate dispositions of a speaker to be positively relevant to what counts in their judgment as the referent of a given term" (41) (This gives sense to Mendola's claim that it is the *semantic* a priori that matters.) These properties have various "weights" which are put to use in the determination of a term's reference in various circumstances and these weights are, as well, fixed by a speaker's internally determinate dispositions. No doubt such properties will be a motley group; still, there are some that, for Mendola, have special importance; in particular, these are properties "taken by" the speaker as analytically true of the things in the term's extension, the metalinguistic property of being referred to by the particular term, and any other properties "taken by" the speaker as a priori true of things in the extension (ibid.). (Again, that something is so "taken by" a speaker is fixed by her dispositions.) All these properties taken together with their weights are the description cluster of the term. And these are then rigidified via a particular construal of David Kaplan's "dthat" (1978). So, finally, Mendola's RDC account has it that the content of a term "X" in the case of linguistically mediated thought is "dthat[best satisfier of the description cluster for 'X']" (305).

The powerful resources of RDC permit Mendola to offer rather compelling replies to some familiar objections to the metalinguistic gambit. Still, as Mendola shows, there are pressing intuitive worries, and of a familiar sort, for his RDC reply the famous externalist cases. These are developed, with great attention under the headings of the "multiple contents objection" (46), the "belief ascription objection" (48), and the "subject matter objection" (49). So, Mendola admits, as he must, that there is strain between our commonsense appeal to and deployment of content and the narrow content proposal on offer.

Here, his maneuver is novel. In Chapter 3, he aims to show that any form of externalism must itself be prey to versions of the above mentioned three objections and so will itself be subject to the very same strain. This is because any externalism must come to grips with the famous internalist cases. The internalist cases that Mendola develops with greatest attention are Frege's worry about co-referential names that differ in cognitive significance and Russell's anxiety about empty names. And, of course, it's not just the Easter Bunny and Superman that we have to be concerned about, since there are similar issues raised with respect to more than few kind terms from the history of science. As Mendola puts it, "[i]t is sociologically remarkable that *Naming and Necessity* effectively disposed of the description theory of names and its descendents

without addressing in any serious way these two central motivations for such accounts" (56). To be clear, Mendola grants that there are plausible replies the sophisticated externalist has available and, so, grants that externalism remains viable. It's just that all such versions, in coming to grips with internalist cases are, more or less, obviously subject to the same objections to which sophisticated forms of internalism are subject in the aftermath of their efforts to reply to externalist cases. On the basis of the famous externalist cases, on the one hand, and the famous internalist cases, on the other, it's a draw.

Still, the game isn't over and Mendola's claim is that an apparent strength of externalism—that it explains and insists on coming to grips with various facts about reference and truth—is, in fact, its undoing. This point may be familiar; yet Mendola's development of it by attention to cases is, I think, greatly illuminating. One chief claim in this regard is that in many cases the reference or extension of a term will reflect the merely "arbitrary, quirky, or highly conventional" (88). In cases where such arbitrary quirks are not "reflected in the narrow content, externalism," Mendola notes, "may provide an account of the truth-conditions of thoughts that is more intuitive in detail than the kind of match to the world that narrow content can alone provide" (89). But for that very reason, externalism is defeated; externalism is consumed in the task of drawing distinctions that are psychologically irrelevant. Thought content is all about what is psychological relevant. The point here is not that reference and truth are never relevant, it's just that when there are, that's by virtue of something else and something fundamental: the "match" (Mendola's term of art) between narrow content and the world (80).

This deposits us directly at what Mendola takes to be the basis of thought content: qualia and, so, to his MS. The view is complex and richly ornamented, and it takes shape against the background of Mendola's investigations of externalist-orientated accounts of sensory contents, and what he terms "mind-based" externalisms. His criticisms of etiologically-based accounts are very effective. His criticisms of non-etiological accounts (and especially of Jerry Fodor's Asymmetric Dependence account) are impressively original. Modal Structuralism, in brief, is the view that sensory contents are qualia; that qualia are constituted by internal physical states and that this relationship is necessary but a posteriori; drawing on C.L. Hardin's important work on color vision, the view is also that there is a complex modal structure to each mode of sensation (say, color vision), one which is "shared by the experienced properties … and the neurophysiological basis of that possible range of experience" (18). For this reason, Mendola makes much of the facts of color-blindness since that is a case in which internal differences explain, compellingly, differences in

color experience and, so, offers a model for the explanation of differences in sensory contents by appeal to solely internal differences more generally (107). At all events, the chief upshot of the view is clear: qualitative content provides the wherewithal for the "matching" relation between sensory content and the world, the wherewithal for a kind of "success or truth-condition" (197).

Perhaps the chief worry for many readers concerning the semantic relevance of the qualitative or experiential à la MS, comes late in Chapter 7. There Mendola cites worries of John Campbell that seem to me worth quoting since they are likely to be widely shared. Campbell's worry about such projects as MS is that it's hard to see how they put us in a position to think about a mind independent world. Mendola insists that we can make sense of a match or failure of match between such internally determined qualia and the world. About this Lockean ploy, Campbell writes, "[t]his desperate manoeuvre has no hope of success, and Berkeley's stricture, that there can be no resemblance between an idea and a physical property, seems perfectly reasonable" (cited at 211). Mendola replies that there just is no compelling basis for thinking that an experience and a thing in the outer world cannot involve the same properties. And that seems right or, at least, reasonable. But I'm tempted to say that it seems right *just* by virtue of the fact that the standard whereby we judge whether there is a match or failure of match is supplied by the outer world and the things in it rather than from behind the veil of sensations or ideas. Still, in the argumentative context, it is difficult to see how this could fail to be anything but question begging.

If we read the above as a worry about the determinateness or "focus" (211) of such contents, then it can be said that much of the rest of the book is an effort (via the filling out of NEI) to show that there's no cause for alarm. Mendola's effort is to show how it is that internalism can help itself to proto-judgments and the primary imagination and has the resources to capture spatial thought. In his close investigation of language-based externalisms and in his replies to multiple formulations of private language-style arguments, we're shown how it is that a suitably nimble internalism can help itself to a qualia-based model of language-mediated thoughts and to internalist variants of Davidsonian triangulation, Morton's interpreter relativity, motor capacities as a ground of our causal notions, Brandom's deontic score-keeping, and more. In complex fashion, this provides a layered (or, perhaps, palimpsestic) picture of narrow contents and so a richly nuanced account of what we share and do not share when we communicate and learn from each other.

As I say, this is heady stuff. Those who have never really been able to shape their intuitions to the demands of externalism will be delighted with *Anti-*

Externalism; those who can't imagine a coherent alternative to externalism will likely be surprised—or, if not surprised, then, at least, very much annoyed.

References

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