

## The Insignificance of Transparency

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The question of whether semantic externalism is compatible with a plausible account of self-knowledge has been much debated over the last couple of decades, and by now the positions are well established. There are the two well-known incompatibilist lines of argument: The switching argument (according to which externalism implies that there can be changes in content which are not discernible a priori), and the reductio argument (according to which compatibilism has the absurd consequence that we can know facts about the external environment a priori).<sup>1</sup> And there are the two well-known lines of response, a switching response (SR), and a reductio response (RR):

(SR) We must distinguish between *introspective knowledge of an occurrent thought* (as in ‘I am thinking with this thought that water is wet’) and *knowledge of comparative content* (being able to tell WATER-thoughts from TWATER-thoughts).<sup>2</sup> Self-knowledge merely requires the former, not the latter, and content externalism does not threaten the former, since basic self-ascriptions of occurrent thoughts are self-verifying. Even if the subject is in a switching scenario her self-ascriptions will be correct.<sup>3</sup>

(RR) Knowing that one is thinking that water is wet does not require knowing anything about how the content of this thought is determined or whether it is dependent on the external environment. For instance, I may know that I am thinking that water is wet, without knowing whether WATER is a natural kind concept, and it is only if WATER is a

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<sup>1</sup> For the switching argument see for instance Boghossian 1989, 1994. For the reductio argument see McKinsey 1991 and Boghossian 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For this distinction see for instance Brown 2004: 37-59, and Falvey & Owens 1994: 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> The classic statements of this compatibilist argument can be found in Burge 1988 and Davidson 1987.

natural kind concept (actually picking out a natural kind) that it depends on the external environment.<sup>4</sup>

It should be clear that there is a connection between the two lines of defense. In both cases it is argued that basic self-knowledge, knowledge of an occurrent thought, should be distinguished from a more demanding type of knowledge involving detailed knowledge of the *content* of the thought: In (SR) knowledge of comparative content, in (RR) knowledge of the semantics of the content (in particular, its metasemantics).<sup>5</sup> The strategy, therefore, is to clearly separate the issue of self-knowledge from issues concerning knowledge of content.<sup>6</sup> Prima facie, this is a reasonable proposal: Knowledge of content, in both sense (SR) and (RR) is a meta-level knowledge and as such it is cognitively demanding. Knowledge of an occurrent thought, by contrast, is something (intuitively) that can be achieved by a small child (once she has acquired the concepts of the relevant mental states). Consequently, we should be skeptical of an account of self-knowledge that requires this type of meta-level knowledge of contents and semantics. To the extent that the incompatibilist relies on this requirement, compatibilism seems to be in good shape.

However, the incompatibilist has another line of attack, one that has drawn much attention recently and which is derived from considerations of reasoning and rationality, according to which the issue of 'knowledge of content' cannot be so easily dismissed.

Externalist theories of mental content, it is argued, undermine 'the transparency of mental

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance McLaughlin & Tye 1998 and Brown 2004.

<sup>5</sup> It could be asked whether knowledge of the metasemantics of 'water' would really make a difference to the reductio argument. For instance, I might know that if I am on earth and the watery stuff is H<sub>2</sub>O then 'water' expresses WATER, whereas if I am on twin earth and the water stuff is XYZ, then 'water' expresses TWATER, etc, but this does not suffice for the reductio to go through. It would lead too far to discuss this conditional proposal here, but it should be noted that it too presupposes separating the two types of knowledge: The suggestion is that one can have knowledge of one's occurrent 'water'-thoughts, without knowing anything about the actual determination of the content (indeed, one would not even know whether the determination is internalist or externalist). For a discussion, see Häggqvist & Wikforss 2007.

<sup>6</sup> For a very clear statement of this strategy see Goldberg 2003b.

content', the thesis that subjects can tell a priori, on the basis of introspection, whether two thoughts have the same content. A standard formulation of the thesis is the following:

(TrC) For any two thoughts, or thought constituents, that *S* entertains at time *t*, *S* can realize a priori, at *t*, whether they have the same contents.<sup>7</sup>

That externalism poses a threat to transparency is illustrated already by the switching argument. However, according to this new line of attack, the real worry does not concern self-knowledge but that the transparency of content is presupposed by the role played by content in assessments of rationality and the explanation of action. For instance, Paul Boghossian has argued that the claim that content is transparent is a “semantically significant thesis”, one that plays an important role in our ordinary conception of mental content (1994: 45).<sup>8</sup> Even if the compatibilist is right to suggest that there is a basic type of self-knowledge that is not threatened by content externalism, therefore, the question remains whether the fact that content externalism undermines transparency is compatible with an acceptable account of *reasoning*.

This sets the stage for a new debate between incompatibilists and compatibilists, where the focus is no longer on self-knowledge as such, but on reasoning and rationality: According to the (new) incompatibilist, the possibility of reasoning and rationality (practical as well as theoretical) presupposes transparency of content, and any account that threatens transparency (such as externalism and Millianism) is therefore incompatible with the only plausible account of reasoning. According to the (new) compatibilist, by contrast, a rejection of transparency is perfectly compatible with an acceptable account of reasoning and rationality. Indeed, the compatibilist suggests, externalists (and Millians) can exploit the fact that their theory implies that content is *not* transparent: The subject's reasoning, it is argued,

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<sup>7</sup> This formulation of the thesis derives from Brown 2003 and 2004. See also Boghossian 1994, Campbell 1987, Falvey and Owens 1994, Recanati 2012, Sainsbury & Tye 2012, and Schroeter 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See also Boghossian 2011.

can be accounted for by appealing to the fact that she is mistaken about the sameness and difference of the contents of her own thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

Since I have argued elsewhere that the central objection to externalism concerns not self-knowledge, but the role of content in reasoning and action explanation, I think the focus on reasoning is appropriate.<sup>10</sup> However, I do not think that the focus on content transparency is promising; on the contrary, I think that it constitutes yet another detour. Just as it is problematic to claim that knowledge of content is of importance to self-knowledge, I argue, so is it problematic to claim that knowledge of content is of importance to reasoning. It is quite correct, of course, that externalism (and Millianism) undermines the transparency thesis, (TrC), and it is at least plausible that internalism (and Fregeanism) supports the thesis.<sup>11</sup> However, the implications for transparency are byproducts, as it were, of the theories, and it is a mistake to conclude that transparency is of central significance. In this sense, I suggest, both sides of the debate are mistaken, the new incompatibilists as well as the new compatibilists. Both sides make two central assumptions:

- (i) Subjects have meta-level beliefs about the contents of their own thoughts; and
- (ii) These meta-level beliefs play an important role in the subject's theoretical and practical reasoning.

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Brown 2003 and 2004, Millikan 1993, Sainsbury & Tye 2012, and Schroeter 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Wikforss 2006 and 2008a.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to be clear about the relations between Millianism and externalism on the one hand, and Fregeanism and internalism on the other. As I have argued elsewhere, internalism and externalism are best understood as meta-semantic theses concerning the *determination* of content (Wikforss 2008b). Fregeanism and Millianism, by contrast, are *semantic* theories, telling us something about the semantics of our expressions and thoughts. Although there are connections between meta-semantics and semantics (for instance, Millian theories are paired with a causal, externalist theory of meaning determination), the relations can be quite complex. In particular, it is possible to imagine a version of descriptivism combined with an externalist meta-semantics. In what follows I will leave these complexities be, since what matters here is what externalism and Millianism have in common: That they face (prima facie) difficulties capturing the subject's reasoning.

I argue that both assumptions are problematic. The upshot, once again, is that the central point of contention between internalists and externalists is not epistemological; rather, I suggest, it concerns *what role the theory of content should play*.

The paper is divided into three main parts. In the first part I set the stage by distinguishing between two notions of transparency that are both present in the debate, what I call ‘access transparency’ and ‘functional transparency’, and I spell out the motivations behind the contemporary appeal to transparency considerations. In the second, I consider two common construals of the relevant meta-level beliefs and argue that they cannot play the role required of them by both sides of the debate. In the final part I consider a third construal of the transparency thesis and the meta-beliefs it appeals to, according to which the central notion of transparency concerns the transparency of *belief* (and only implicitly transparency of content). I argue that although this allows for a more plausible construal of the relevant meta-beliefs, it too fails to show that these beliefs play an important role in reasoning. I end with some reflections on the connections between functional and access transparency.

## **1. The significance of transparency**

### **1.1 Access transparency and functional transparency**

The contemporary discussion of content transparency takes its starting point in Dummett’s claim that linguistic meaning is transparent. It is an undeniable feature of the notion of meaning, Dummett writes, “that meaning is *transparent* in the sense that, if someone attaches a meaning to each of two words, he must know whether these meanings are the same” (Dummett 1978: 131). Boghossian elaborates on Dummett’s thesis. First, he argues, the thesis is not merely the weak one that for any two expressions it must be possible for *S* to come to know whether or not they mean the same, but the stronger thesis that “it must be possible for that person to come to know such a fact purely *introspectively*, without the benefit of further

empirical investigation” (Boghossian 1994: 33). Second, the transparency thesis, in its most interesting form, concerns not the meaning of linguistic expressions, but *mental content*. This is so, Boghossian argues, since the assumption that mental content is transparent is essential to our conceptions of rationality and rational explanations:

We don't just ascribe thoughts to a person in order to say something true of him. We use such ascriptions for two related purposes: on the one hand to enable assessments of his rationality and, on the other, to explain his behavior. As these matters are currently conceived, a thought must be epistemically transparent if it is to play these roles (1994: 39).

The transparency thesis, as understood by Boghossian, is a thesis concerning *epistemic access*: In the case of linguistic meaning, the access speakers have to the meaning of their linguistic expressions; in the case of mental content, the access individuals have to the contents of their own thoughts and attitudes. Let us, consequently, call this type of transparency *access transparency*. Since the concern is with epistemic access, the relevant notion of knowledge is propositional knowledge. This means that if meaning and contents are access transparent, the individual is to be attributed meta-beliefs about the sameness and difference of meanings and contents respectively. Moreover, the beliefs should be *a priori*, in the sense that they should be based on introspection rather than on empirical investigations.<sup>12</sup>

It is of importance to distinguish access transparency from a second notion of transparency, also found in the literature, what I will call *functional transparency*. The thesis that meaning and mental content are functionally transparent is not an epistemic thesis, but a thesis about the determination of meaning and content. It is motivated by the idea that meaning and content play an important role in explaining the subject's point of view, her

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<sup>12</sup> In the case of linguistic meaning it does not seem right to say, as Boghossian does, that the beliefs are based on *introspection*. More plausibly, the beliefs would be based on *reflection* (as when one reflects on how one would use a term in various scenarios).

reasoning and actions. Thus, Francois Recanati, defending the transparency of sense, makes clear that transparency boils down to the requirement that content should capture the subject's cognitive perspective, and that transparency construed this way does not require the attribution of meta-beliefs to the subject.<sup>13</sup> Applied to linguistic meaning, therefore, functional transparency does not concern our knowledge of meaning, but is simply a version of the thesis that meaning is determined by the individual's use of a term. For instance, if the speaker assents to 'Hesperus is Hesperus' but dissents from 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' the terms 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' do not have the same meaning for *S*. Applied to the level of content, similarly, functional transparency does not concern access to contents but is just the thesis that thought content is determined by cognitive role. Thus, if *S* reasons as if two thought tokens are about distinct objects (as in the case of Hesperus and Phosphorus) then the thoughts have distinct content; conversely, if *S* reasons as if two thought components have the same content (as in the switching scenario), then they do.<sup>14</sup>

Access transparency and functional transparency are therefore importantly different: Whereas access transparency concerns propositional knowledge and involves the attribution of meta-beliefs to the subject, functional transparency is not a thesis about (propositional) knowledge of content and does not require the speaker to have meta-beliefs about the sameness and difference of meanings and contents. The focus in this paper shall be

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<sup>13</sup> Recanati 2012: 96-110. See also Schroeter 2007. Although Recanati speaks of 'epistemic transparency' he makes clear that his notion of transparency does not involve meta-level judgments (see in particular footnote 83, p. 102). And although Schroeter starts with Dummett's thesis and speaks of the idea that we normally have 'direct and authoritative access' to the contents of our own thoughts, the central claims made in the paper concern functional transparency.

<sup>14</sup> Recanati actually does not endorse full functional transparency since he argues that in a switching scenario, where a subject equivocates between two distinct concepts, there is failure of reference. On his construal, therefore, the transparency thesis is conditional on successful reference: If the subject treats two mental tokens as co-referring then they do, *if they refer at all* (2012; 109).

on access transparency. This is the notion of transparency that thesis (TrC) concerns, and it is the notion that plays a central role in the contemporary debate initiated by Boghossian.<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2 Transparency under threat

To illustrate the role of access transparency in the contemporary debate, let us consider theories that are said to violate the thesis that content is transparent. In this context, two aspects of the thesis are commonly distinguished: The transparency of *sameness* of content and the transparency of *difference* of content.<sup>16</sup> Millian theories of content are mentioned as prime examples of theories that are incompatible with transparency of sameness of content: For instance, Pierre is unable to know, a priori, that ‘London’ expresses the same content as ‘Londres’. And Twin Earth externalism is said to pose a threat to transparency of difference of content: Oscar, after being (unknowingly) switched to Twin Earth, is unable to tell that his current 'water'-concept, is distinct from that of his original 'water'-concept (retained in his memories from Earth).<sup>17</sup>

Proponents of transparency take the violation of transparency to be a serious problem for Millianism and externalism respectively since, they argue, it undermines a plausible account of reasoning and rationality. The problem, Boghossian argues, is “that when mental contents violates one or both of these transparency theses, we get cases where a thinker who intuitively looks fully rational, and is merely missing some empirical information, is made to look as though he is committing simple logical fallacies in his

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<sup>15</sup> It is an interesting question how access transparency and functional transparency are related. I will return to this question below, in the final section.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Boghossian 1994: 36, and Brown 2004: 160.

<sup>17</sup> As noted in Goldberg 2008, the situation may be even worse, since assuming metaphysical realism (that some empirical truths are not knowable to humans) it is possible that some contents are determined by facts that no one (expert or not) will ever be in a position to have knowledge of.



reasoning”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the case of Millianism, the upshot is that the subject is to be ascribed contradictory beliefs, and fails to realize the validity of simple inferences. For instance, Pierre fails to realize that the thought expressed by ‘London is not pretty’ contradicts that expressed by ‘Londres is pretty’, and he fails to draw the proper theoretical and practical inferences about the city he lives in. Assuming social externalism, even non-Millian contents may violate the transparency of sameness of content, as illustrated by an example due to Falvey and Owens, involving the terms ‘cilantro’ and ‘coriander’.<sup>19</sup> They imagine an individual, Rudolf, who partially understands these terms, and defers to experts for their correct use. As it turns out, the experts treat the terms as synonyms, naming the same herb, although Rudolf fails to realize this. He knows that cilantro and coriander are both herbs, but thinks of cilantro as the fresh herb used in Mexican cooking, and coriander as a dried herb. Thus, Rudolf assents both to ‘Cilantro should be used sparingly’ and to ‘Coriander should not be used sparingly’, and he fails to draw some obviously valid inferences.

Similarly, it is argued, when transparency of *difference* of content is undermined, the subject will make some simple invalid inferences. For instance, Oscar is switched to Twin Earth and, as a result, he (eventually) acquires the concept TWATER in addition to the original concept WATER. The new concept is employed in beliefs about current events, the old concept in memory beliefs dating back to Oscar’s Earth days. Since Oscar is not able to tell that the concepts are different he is likely to make simple reasoning errors when current beliefs are mixed with memory beliefs.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Oscar believes:

(1) There was water in the well at my childhood farm;

as well as

(2) There is twater in the well at my new farm;

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<sup>18</sup> Boghossian 2011: 458-459.

<sup>19</sup> Falvey & Owens 1994. For a discussion of this case see Brown 2004: 161.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that not all externalists agree that Oscar retains the old concept. For these externalists, therefore, this problem does not arise.

from which he concludes:

(3) The well at my new farm contains the same liquid as the well at my childhood farm. Thus he makes a simple invalid inference. This, it is held, illustrates how failures of transparency threaten the ordinary idea that subjects are (by and large) rational and do not make simple reasoning errors.<sup>21</sup>

In both cases, that is, the semantic theory in question mandates that subjects whose capacity for rational thought we have no reason to question, are to be described as being blatantly irrational. Hence, intuitively, the theory fails to capture the subject's cognitive perspective. The source of the trouble, the incompatibilist argues, is precisely that externalism (Millianism) fail to respect the transparency of content thesis, (TrC). According to Boghossian, this illustrates how absolutely central assumptions about transparency are to our ordinary conceptions of reasons and rationality. Indeed, he suggests, it illustrates that the transparency is a crucial (if unstated) premise underlying both internalist and Fregean conceptions of content. This can be illustrated, Boghossian suggests, if we consider Frege's classic argument for the thesis that names have a sense and not merely reference (1994: 46-47).

Boghossian discusses the case of Mary who sincerely asserts 'Ali was a champ' and also asserts 'Clay was not a champ', even though 'Ali' and 'Clay' refer to the same boxer. On the assumption that sincere assertion entails belief, Boghossian argues, we may conclude that Mary believes that Ali was a champ and she believes that Clay was not a champ. However, Boghossian continues, this does not in itself support referential opacity since nothing so far prevents the conclusion that Mary has contradictory beliefs. What is required for the argument to go through is a "reason why an ascription of contradictory beliefs is unacceptable in the present instance" (ibid. 46). We get such a reason, Boghossian argues,

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance Boghossian 2011 and Brown 2004, chapter 5.

only if we insist that the contents of Mary's beliefs are knowable a priori, i.e. only if they are epistemically transparent. Without transparency, Mary would not see the contradiction and so she would be blameless, and the Fregean appeal to sense would lack motivation (ibid. 48-49).

According to Boghossian, therefore, it is not merely the case that there is a connection between internalism (Fregeanism) and transparency, it is also the case that the former *presupposes* the latter. The new compatibilists have been quick to exploit this claim: If, indeed, the arguments for internalism and Fregeanism presuppose that content is transparent then those very same arguments can be undermined simply by giving up on the transparency thesis. For instance, Jessica Brown has argued that the Fregean arguments for a sense-reference distinction presuppose that sameness of content is transparent, and that, therefore, rejecting transparency undermines the Fregean argument and provides an alternative explanation of the subject's perspective. Thus, she considers Celeste who takes a different attitude towards 'The Morning Star is the Evening Star' than to 'The Morning Star is the Morning Star'. Instead of invoking a difference in content, Brown argues, we can explain this by denying that sameness of content is transparent and appealing to the idea that Celeste thinks, mistakenly, that there is a difference in content: "although Celeste associates thought-constituents having the same content with 'the Morning Star' and 'the Evening Star', she supposes they have different contents since she thinks that the two expressions refer to different planets" (2003: 444).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, it has been suggested that by giving up on the transparency of difference of content, we can explain why Oscar, in the switching scenario, reasons invalidly: The fallacy is a result of Oscar's mistaken belief that his thought in the first

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<sup>22</sup> A similar idea appears in Sainsbury & Tye 2012. They argue that rejecting transparency provides the Millian with an alternative solution to a set of paradoxes of thought, such as those involving Twin Earth and Kripke's Paderewski case.

premise ('There was water in the well of my childhood farm') involves the same 'water'-concept as that in the second ('There is twater in the well at my new farm').<sup>23</sup>

This means that the new incompatibilists and the new compatibilists both take transparency to play a pivotal role. Moreover, the relevant notion of transparency is that of *access* transparency: It is held that meta-level beliefs about the sameness and difference in content play an important role in the subject's reasoning.<sup>24</sup> The difference between the two camps is that while the incompatibilists take these meta-beliefs to be true and suggest that this is important if we are to explain the subject's reasoning and actions, the compatibilists argue that these meta-level beliefs often are false and that this provides an alternative explanation of the subject's reasoning. Both sides of the debate therefore share the two central assumptions mentioned in the introduction: (i) that subjects have meta-level beliefs about the contents of their own thoughts and attitudes; (ii) that this is semantically significant since these beliefs play a central role in explaining the subject's reasoning and actions. Next, let us examine these assumptions.

## 2. Content judgments

As we have seen above, the contemporary transparency thesis is intended to go beyond Dummett's thesis in two respects: The transparency concerns *the content of mental events*, not the meaning of linguistic signs, and the relevant knowledge has to be *a priori*, based on introspection. Whether linguistic meaning is transparent in Dummett's sense is

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<sup>23</sup> Brown 2004: 167.

<sup>24</sup> This might be challenged on the grounds that it is sufficient if the relevant higher-order proposition is merely tacitly presupposed, rather than believed, in which case functional transparency is all that is required. However, since the central idea underlying both lines of argument is precisely that the *rationality* of the subject's reasoning depends on the transparency content (or failure thereof), it is not sufficient that the proposition is tacitly presupposed – it must also play the reason providing role of a *belief*.

controversial.<sup>25</sup> However, even if one grants the transparency of meaning it is quite another matter to claim that mental content is transparent.

The claim that meaning is access transparent implies that speakers are to be attributed meta-linguistic beliefs of the following sort:

- (i) The meaning of ‘cilantro’ is the same as the meaning of ‘coriander’.
- (ii) The meaning of ‘water’ as used in context C1 is not the same as the meaning of ‘water’ as used in context C2.<sup>26</sup>

The claim that content is access transparent, similarly, would involve the attribution of beliefs about the contents of thoughts to individuals.<sup>27</sup> In this case, however, it is not so clear how such beliefs are to be understood.

The standard formulation of content transparency in terms of access to contents of thought tokens, as in (TrC), suggests that the relevant judgments are to be construed as a form of ‘meta-linguistic’ judgments. The subject is said to know (introspectively) that a particular thought token, at a time, has a content that is different from (or the same as) the content of another such token. This strongly suggests that thoughts are to be construed as a form of mental expressions that we may have access to independently of knowing their contents, much like we do in the case of linguistic signs, and that the relevant content judgments involve reference to these. Boghossian, in his first discussion of transparency,

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<sup>25</sup> For a recent discussion see Pagin (MS).

<sup>26</sup> The beliefs could also be tied to the meaning of a word in a particular utterance, capturing the idea that transparency of meaning concerns knowledge of the meaning of one’s own words as used on a given occasion.

<sup>27</sup> Dummett formulates the transparency thesis in terms of what the speaker *must know*. On this formulation, the claim that meaning is transparent implies that the speaker must have meta-linguistic beliefs about the sameness and difference of meaning. But sometimes the transparency thesis is formulated not in terms of what the subject knows, but what she is in a position to know. For instance, (TrC) appeals to what the subject *can realize*. If so, the subject need not have the relevant meta-beliefs, it is sufficient that she *could* have them. However, the difficulties raised below with respect to access transparency apply equally to the weaker claim that the subject could have these beliefs. Moreover, as noted above, the claim that meta-beliefs about contents play an important role in the subject’s reasoning requires not only that the subject *could* have these beliefs but that she does.

quite explicitly endorses this construal. Discussing a version of the switching case, where Peter draws an invalid inference involving Pavarotti and twin-Pavarotti, Boghossian writes that Peter's externally individuated thought tokens are not epistemically transparent to him: "In particular, Peter's language of thought contains token expressions that possess different semantic values despite being of the same syntactic type. ... From the inside, however, there will be no indication of this: as far as Peter is concerned, they will appear to express precisely the same contents." (1994: 39).

If this is how knowledge of content is to be construed, the claim that content is transparent implies that the subject is able to form beliefs, on the basis of introspection, of the following sort:

- (iii) The content of internal expression  $e_1$ , as used in thought  $t_1$ , is the same as (distinct from) the content of internal expression  $e_2$ , as used in thought  $t_2$ .

However, this construal is problematic. The trouble is not merely that understood this way the thesis would seem to entail a commitment to the controversial language of thought hypothesis. The trouble is the very idea that subjects are able to introspect the expressions of this language and form judgments about their contents. It is quite clear that we have no such access to anything like symbols of a *lingua mentis*. Indeed, those who accept that there is a language of thought deny that there can be any form of introspective access to this language.<sup>28</sup> The point, of course, is not that the content of the language of thought is *non-transparent*, in the sense that subjects have mistaken beliefs about these contents, but that the content of the language of thought is not an object of propositional knowledge in the first place. Indeed, even if the talk of mental expressions does not commit one to the strong claim that there is a

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<sup>28</sup> The classic discussion of this is in Fodor 1975, chapter 2. He argues that there is no internal representation of the truth conditions of sentences in the language of thought. Rather, he suggests, we simply use these representations in a certain way and that's the end of it. For instance, the answer to the question of how we use the predicates of the language of thought correctly, Fodor suggests, is "that we just do; that we are just built that way" (1975: 66).

full-fledged language of thought, with a language-like syntax and semantics, the very idea that knowledge of content involves having introspective access to the content of mental expressions would seem deeply problematic.

If the proponent of transparency were committed to the claim that subjects are to be attributed meta-beliefs along the lines of (iii), therefore, it would be hard even to get the thesis off the ground. Robert Stalnaker, discussing self-knowledge and externalism, voices this worry, and argues that “we shouldn’t think of access to our thoughts as access to an internal vehicle of representation” (2008: 131). In his recent paper, however, Boghossian rejects this reading of the transparency thesis. The proponent of transparency, he argues, is not committed to the idea that mental contents are carried by word-like components that can be identified independently of their meanings. Concepts, Boghossian suggests, are simply to be thought of as propositional constituents and hence there is no need to postulate a language of thought “with consciously accessible mental words”.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests a rather different construal of the judgments presupposed by the transparency thesis. If knowledge of content is not a matter of knowing the content of mental expressions, but is to be construed as knowledge of propositional constituents, then knowledge of contents would seem to involve knowledge of abstract objects. The relevant judgments, thus, do not involve reference to mental vehicles, but are to be construed as ‘bare’ content judgments. For instance, S believes that:

(iv) The concept CILANTRO is the same as the concept CORIANDER.

(v) The concept WATER is distinct from the concept TWATER.

This avoids the difficulties involved in the idea that we have access to the components of language of thought. However, it also implies a construal of content judgments that cannot play a role in accounting for the subject’s cognitive perspective, her reasoning and actions.

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<sup>29</sup> Boghossian 2011: 461.

The trouble derives from the fact that judgments such as (iv)-(vii) are judgments *about concepts and contents* – judgments about abstract objects and not about the subject’s first-order thoughts.<sup>30</sup> By denying that transparency involves a commitment to something like a language of thought, ‘word-like components’ that can be identified independently of their contents, the link between content judgments and the subject’s first-order thoughts is severed. If so, a subject can know that two concepts are the same or different, without knowing anything whatsoever about the content of her occurrent thoughts. Can this problem be overcome?<sup>31</sup>

Boghossian’s idea, it seems, is that we simply need to add a premise about the subject’s access to her occurrent thoughts. Criticizing Stalnaker’s claim that transparency presupposes that there is a language of thought, Boghossian argues that the only assumption he needs to make about the internal component is that “a thinker can be introspectively aware that he has an occurrent thought when he has one, something that seems so intuitive as to need no argument”.<sup>32</sup> That is, all that is needed is the assumption that subjects have self-knowledge of occurrent thoughts, in the basic sense mentioned above. The claim that content is transparent, then, is to be understood as the conjunction of two separate theses, the transparency of contents and concepts as abstract objects, and the transparency of thought:

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<sup>30</sup> Nor, notice, is it at all plausible to say that they are based on *introspection*. Even if it were granted that content judgments are a priori in the sense that they are not based on outer experience, it is very difficult to see how they could be based on inner experience. Concepts, on this view, are abstract objects and I cannot discern whether two such objects are the same or not by inspecting my own mind (anymore than introspection reveals whether two numbers are the same or not).

<sup>31</sup> It might be said that even if this is so, we can simply read off facts about transparency from facts about how the subject actually reasons. For instance, if she reasons as if CILANTRO is the same as the concept CORIANDER (and this is false), then the contents are not transparent to her. However, this only holds for *functional* transparency. The point made here is precisely that concepts can be access transparent (in Boghossian’s sense) and yet functional transparency will fail. For further elaboration of this point, see below.

<sup>32</sup> Boghossian 2011: 461.



(TrC\*) For any two contents  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ,  $S$  can realize a priori whether they are the same or different.

(TrT) For any occurrent thought  $T$  that  $S$  thinks at time  $t$ ,  $S$  can realize a priori, at  $t$ , that she is thinking  $T$ .

The trouble is that these combined theses do not add up to the original thesis (TrC): While thesis (TrC\*) is about knowledge of contents as abstract objects, it is not about knowledge of one's own thoughts, and while thesis (TrT) is about knowledge of one's own thoughts it is not about knowledge of contents. Even if it is argued that (TrT) implicitly involves a form of basic 'knowledge of content', it remains the case that theses (TrT) and (TrC\*) do not add up to the original transparency thesis. This becomes very clear if one tries to apply the combined theses to the problem cases introduced above: The case of Oscar in the switching scenario, and the case of Mary who fails to know that there is only one boxer involved. That is, even if we assume that content is transparent in Boghossian's sense (combining (TrC\*) and (TrT)) this does not remove the difficulties of these scenarios. As a consequence, the claim that content is transparent is rendered insignificant when it comes to accounting for cognitive perspective.

First, consider Oscar in the switching scenario as described above, and assume that Oscar makes correct content judgments and does so purely a priori. That is, he judges, correctly, that the concept WATER is distinct from the concept TWATER. Moreover, he has introspective access to his occurrent thoughts, i.e. 'knowledge of content' in the weak sense of (TrT); he self-ascribes both the thought that there was water in the well of his childhood farm and the thought that there is twater in the well of his new farm. However, it should be clear, none of this helps Oscar avoid the invalid reasoning. He knows that the two concepts are distinct and yet he will, as before, move from the premises containing distinct concepts to

the invalid conclusion. The bare content judgment simply does not interact with his first-order thoughts in the way required for transparency to play the role allotted to it.<sup>33</sup>

It should be stressed that the problem has nothing to do with Oscar's level of conceptual or theoretical sophistication. We can imagine him being completely infallible when it comes to bare content judgments: He never makes any mistakes about the sameness and difference of concepts. And we can imagine him to have full introspective knowledge: Whenever he believes that he is thinking that water is wet, he is thinking that water is wet; and whenever he is thinking that water is wet, he believes that he is thinking that water is wet. Nevertheless, his knowledge of the relations that hold between concepts, in conjunction with his introspective knowledge, does not prevent him from making the basic reasoning errors, precisely because this conceptual knowledge does not tell him anything about what concepts are exercised in a particular thought.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly in the case of Mary who sincerely asserts 'Ali was a champ' as well as 'Clay was not a champ'. Let us add, in this case too, that mental content is transparent in Boghossian's sense. That is, assume that Mary has the true meta-belief that the concept ALI is the concept CLAY. As before, this is a pure content judgment and will fail to interact with her introspective beliefs. Thus, she has the correct meta-belief, as well as the correct introspective beliefs (for instance she believes that she is thinking that Ali was a champ), and yet this will not put her in a position to realize, on reflection alone, that she has contradictory first-order

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<sup>33</sup> For a related point see Goldberg 2003a: 56, and 2003b: 247. Goldberg argues that even if Oscar, on Twin Earth, has a full understanding of the concept TWATER he is not in a position to know a priori that he is thinking with the concept TWATER rather than the concept WATER.

<sup>34</sup> Obviously, this is not to say that it would be *impossible* for him to discover that his thoughts involve different concepts. Perhaps Oscar finds out that he has been switched and that he no longer is on Earth but on Twin Earth where the local liquid is XYZ rather than H<sub>2</sub>O. If he adds this piece of empirical knowledge to his knowledge that the concept WATER and the concept TWATER are distinct, plus additional knowledge about the semantics of the term 'water' and how the meaning of a term is related to the concept expressed (in ordinary beliefs as well as memory beliefs), etc. he will eventually be in a position to discover that the inference is invalid. But now, of course, we have gone well beyond what Oscar can know as a result of the transparency of content in Boghossian's sense.

beliefs. Consequently, if the fact that Mary would be contradicting herself did not already provide a reason against a Millian semantics of Mary's terms, adding that content is transparent, in Boghossian's sense, does not provide one either.

The standard construals of the relevant content judgments are therefore problematic: Speakers do not have beliefs about the contents of language of thought, as required by the meta-linguistic construal, and if, instead, the beliefs are construed as being about contents as abstract objects they cannot play any role in accounting for the subject's cognitive perspective. It should be stressed, again, that these difficulties afflict both camps in the debate equally: Both the (new) incompatibilists and the (new) compatibilists make the assumption that transparency judgments (whether true or false) play an important role in accounting for the subject's cognitive perspective.

The question is whether there is an alternative, less problematic way of thinking about transparency – one that does not require the attribution of any problematic content beliefs to speakers, but which nevertheless can be said to play a central role to semantics. Let us consider this question next.

### **3. Belief transparency**

Central to the standard formulations of the transparency of content thesis is the idea that subjects have a meta-level knowledge of the contents of their thoughts and intentional states. This might seem misguided from the start, however, independently of how one construes the relevant content judgments, since it raises the worry that the transparency thesis is simply too cognitively demanding for it to play a central role in the psychological life of ordinary subjects: After all, having beliefs about the contents of one's own thoughts requires having the semantic concepts of CONCEPT and CONTENT and it is doubtful that ordinary speakers have these concepts. Most people would probably draw a blank if asked whether 'Hesperus is

Hesperus' expresses the same content as 'Hesperus is Phosphorus'. Ordinary reasoning does not require explicit knowledge of content, it would seem, any more than basic self-knowledge does. Perhaps, then, the discussion above is an obvious dead end, and perhaps we must think of transparency differently: Not as involving knowledge of the sameness and difference of *contents*, but simply as involving knowledge of sameness and difference of our *mental states*, in particular of our *beliefs*.

This, also, is how the transparency thesis is sometimes formulated in the literature. For instance, David Owen construes transparency as the principle that introspection provides subjects with all they need "to determine sameness and difference in belief".<sup>35</sup> It might therefore be suggested that we can avoid all the difficulties discussed above, simply by sticking to belief transparency:

(TrB) For any two beliefs that S holds at time t, S can realize a priori, at t, whether they are the same or different.

If this is how the transparency thesis is understood, the relevant transparency judgments are second-order beliefs of the following sort:

(vi) My belief that Hesperus is Phosphorus is the same as (distinct from) my belief that Hesperus is Hesperus.

No doubt, second-order beliefs of this sort involve an *implicit* grasp of the concept of content: If the subject judges that her belief that *p* is distinct from her belief that *q*, this judgment reflects an implicit grasp of the idea that sameness and difference of belief depends on the contents of the states. However, it is not required that the subject has any explicit beliefs involving the concepts of CONCEPT and CONTENT.

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<sup>35</sup> Owen 1990: 158. At points, Boghossian also formulates the issue in terms of belief. For instance, discussing Kripke's case of Paul who learns 'cat' and 'chat' separately, Boghossian suggests that: "Paul will not be able to tell *a priori* that the belief he expresses with 'All chats have tails' is the same belief that he expresses with 'All cats have tails'" (1994: 37).

The question is whether the transparency thesis understood this way, is ‘semantically significant’. In particular: Does the Fregean position presuppose (TrB)? Conversely, does rejecting (TrB) provide the Millian (and the externalist) with an alternative account of the subject’s cognitive perspective?

To consider this, let us return to Boghossian’s argument for why transparency is essential to motivate the appeal to Fregean contents. On the assumption that the relevant notion of transparency is that of belief transparency, the argument has the following form:

- (1) The Fregean needs to provide a reason why the attribution of contradictory beliefs is unacceptable.
- (2) Transparency provides the reason: Only on the assumption that the subject knows that her belief that  $p$  contradicts her belief that  $q$ , is it unacceptable to attribute contradictory beliefs.
- (3) Hence, if transparency is rejected the Fregean argument is undermined.

Premise (1) seems plausible: The Fregean needs to provide some reason why we could not simply say that Mary holds contradictory beliefs about the boxer. The question is why we should accept (2). Why should the required reason concern Mary’s capacity to tell the sameness and difference of her beliefs? Belief transparency, I want to suggest, is neither necessary, nor sufficient, for the Fregean argument.

First, let us assume that Mary does not have any second-order beliefs about the sameness and difference of her first-order beliefs. Perhaps she lacks the concept of belief, and is unable to form second-order beliefs of the sort required for belief transparency.<sup>36</sup> Or perhaps she is just not prone to self-reflection (or philosophizing) and would not know how to

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<sup>36</sup> As stressed in the literature, small children and some adults (with severe autism) do not have the concept of belief. This poses difficulties for those who claim that second-order beliefs play an essential semantic role: Most people suffering from autism are highly skilled language users and sophisticated reasoners (as long as the reasoning does not involve the beliefs of others).

answer if we were to ask her whether her beliefs are the same or not. This does not in any way undermine the need to appeal to Fregean contents. We are still faced with the task of giving an account of Mary's perspective, of why she asserts both 'Ali was a champ' and 'Clay was not a champ', and this motivates the appeal to Fregean contents: The difference in attitudes is explained by appealing to a difference in contents. The argument does of course presuppose that content ascriptions should serve the role of capturing the subject's cognitive perspective, in this case the fact that Mary reasons and acts as if there are two distinct boxers. This means that the Fregean has to assume *functional* transparency, i.e. that relevant differences in use (in conceptual role) imply a difference in meaning and content. But, again, functional transparency is distinct from access transparency (including transparency of belief), and does not involve any meta-beliefs on part of the subject.

Next, assume that Mary *is* able to form the required meta-beliefs, and that she would be able to tell, a priori, whether her beliefs contradict one another. Why should this, in and of itself, make the attribution of contradictory beliefs unacceptable? If we do not already have a reason to avoid such attributions, adding that Mary knows that her beliefs are contradictory does not provide one either. And, again, we do already have such a reason: The attribution of contradictory beliefs fails to capture Mary's cognitive perspective, it makes it impossible to explain her reasoning and actions. Hence, belief transparency is neither necessary, nor sufficient for the Fregean argument.

It might be objected that even if this is so, there is nevertheless a *connection* between the Fregean argument and belief transparency, since there are cases where we do attribute contradictory beliefs and these are, precisely, cases where there are failures of self-knowledge. For instance, a subject may have repressed one of her beliefs and as a result have contradictory beliefs without realizing that she does. Consequently, even if the Fregean argument does not presuppose that Mary has true meta-beliefs about her first-order beliefs, it

does presuppose that she does not have *false* such meta-beliefs. The Millian (or the externalist), can simply exploit this and suggest that once the latter presupposition is given up, as Millian contents require, the Fregean argument is undermined: Mary believes both that Ali was a champ and that he was not a champ, she just does not know it.<sup>37</sup>

However, while it is quite correct that there are cases where we do attribute contradictory beliefs because there is failure of self-knowledge, this does not undermine the need for Fregean contents and it does not provide the Millian with an alternative explanation of the subject's cognitive perspective. To bring this out, let us reflect on the trouble caused by the attribution of contradictory beliefs to subjects when it comes to giving an account of the subject's practical and theoretical reasoning. Consider the case where Mary goes to see Ali fight a match. This is explained by her belief that Ali is a champ (in conjunction with her desire to see a champ fight). But, according to the Millian, she also believes that Ali is not a champ. Why, then, does she go to see the match? Contradictory beliefs block all actions: Mary's reason to see the match is undermined by the contradictory belief, giving her equal reason not to see the match. Similarly in the case of theoretical inferences. Mary believes that all champs are hardworking and this belief together with her belief that Ali was a champ supports the conclusion that Ali was hardworking. However, she also believes that Ali was not a champ (according to the Millian), and this should block the inference to her belief that Ali was hardworking. It is of no help at all to add, as the Millian suggests, that Mary does not know that her beliefs are contradictory. This simply does not explain why she acts on one belief but not the other, why she infers from one belief but not the other.

To explain that, something else would have to be added: It would have to be said that Mary *compartmentalizes*, and that one of her beliefs is 'walled off' from her

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<sup>37</sup> This is the explicit strategy used by Sainsbury and Tye (2012). By ascribing false second-order beliefs about the sameness and difference of first-order beliefs, they argue, "we can explain how it is that someone with normal powers can nonetheless be in no position to detect the contradictory character of a pair of his beliefs" (2012: 135).

theoretical and practical reasoning. Such ‘walling off’ takes place in certain familiar cases of psychological irrationality, such as self-deception and repression, and these typically involve failures of self-knowledge. Compartmentalization restores the subject’s rationality, at least partially, and allows us to explain her reasoning and actions. For instance, assume that Mary had a painful childhood and believes both that her father is a nice man, and that her father is not a nice man at all. However, she has managed to repress the latter belief, and acts as if her father is a nice man. In this case, there is a failure of self-knowledge: While Mary self-ascribes the first-order belief that her father is a nice man, she does not self-ascribe the contradictory first-order belief (she might even have the explicit but false second-order belief that she does not believe that her father is a horrid man).

There is therefore a grain of truth in the claim that there is a connection between the issue of self-knowledge of belief and the question of when it is acceptable to attribute contradictory beliefs to a subject: There are cases, involving compartmentalization and failure of self-knowledge, in which rational subjects hold contradictory beliefs. By the same token, there is a connection between the Fregean argument and assumptions about self-knowledge: The Fregean must assume that the difference in attitude (in the case under consideration) cannot be explained as involving compartmentalization and repression. This, however, is an assumption that falls far short of (TrB), and it is an assumption that seems to be very obviously fulfilled in the Fregean cases: In these cases there are no signs of compartmentalization. On the contrary, Mary expresses her beliefs in sincere assertions, and she self-ascribes both of the first-order beliefs correctly: She believes that she believes that Ali was a champ and she believes that she believes that Clay was not a champ. Hence, Mary’s failure to notice the contradiction cannot be said to involve any ‘walling off’ or repression, allowing us to explain why she reasons and acts as she does despite holding contradictory



beliefs.<sup>38</sup> And it is precisely because we lack an explanation of this sort in the Fregean cases, that the attribution of contradictory beliefs is unacceptable.

For this reason the existence of cases of compartmentalization cannot be exploited by the Millian to provide an alternative explanation of the subject's cognitive perspective by rejecting belief transparency. No doubt, it follows from the Millian view that Mary does not know that her beliefs are contradictory. But this cannot in itself be used to explain why Mary acts and reasons as she does. It does not, for instance, explain why she goes to the boxing match. At most, the assertion that she does not know what she believes *absolves* her from her irrationalities. Since Mary's error is not a result of some psychological irrationality on her part but, rather, a result of the semantics, she is not to be criticized. In this sense Mary is perfectly 'rational': Although she holds irrational beliefs (and acts irrationally) this does not show that she has any cognitive shortcomings and it does not provide grounds for criticism. However, the important question does not concern *culpability* but *explanation*.<sup>39</sup> What we were looking for, and what motivates the Fregean, is not absolution, but an explanation of the subject's reasoning and actions.

Similar remarks apply to the case of Twin Earth externalism. Here the problem, again, is not that the theory implies that the subject has to be attributed contradictory beliefs, but that it implies that she has to be attributed different beliefs despite reasoning and acting as if the beliefs were the same. Thus, in the case of Peter above, he reasons as if his beliefs about

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<sup>38</sup> For a related discussion of when compartmentalization can plausibly be invoked, see Glüer 2009: 303.

<sup>39</sup> It should be clear that being irrational is not the same as being culpable or subject to criticism. In general, just as in ethics we must distinguish the question of what is correct (rational or morally right) from the question of when a subject is blameworthy. The distinction is even more important in the case of belief, since the problems with doxastic voluntarism suggest that it is very doubtful that we are responsible for what we believe in the first place. If so, we are never to be blamed for what we believe (in contrast with our *actions*, which are the concern of ethical blame and praise) and the issue of culpability drops out altogether: All that matters to rationality is whether the belief is inferentially supported and coheres with the subject's other beliefs. For a defense of this conception of rationality, see Glüer & Wikforss 2013.

water, involved the same concept as his beliefs about twater, and yet externalism implies that the beliefs are different. As a result he is to be described as making a simple invalid inference, despite being perfectly capable cognitively and not in any way confused. Of course, on the externalist view it follows that Peter does not *know* that he is reasoning invalidly, and this may absolve Peter from his irrationality: He is not to be criticized. However, what the internalist is asking for is not absolutism, but an account of content that serves to capture how Peter reasons. And the assertion that he does not know how he reasons does not meet this demand.

This brings us closer to the real, underlying conflict between Millian and Fregean accounts of content, as well as between internalist and externalist accounts. The real conflict, I submit, concerns *the role of the theory of content*: Are content ascriptions constrained by the requirement that they should serve to explain the subject's reasoning and actions? The Fregean (internalist) accepts this requirement, while the Millian (externalist) rejects it.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the Millian (externalist) appeal to failures of transparency is, in effect, simply a rejection of this requirement: Saying that there is 'transparency failure' whenever the semantics implies the attribution of problematic beliefs, is to deny that there is any need for the semantics to capture the subject's cognitive perspective, allowing us to explain her reasoning and actions.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Some externalists, in fact, accept the requirement (see for instance Burge 1979). As I have argued elsewhere, however, the requirement is in serious tension with externalist theories of content (Wikforss 2006). This is not to say, however, that the internalist must accept the requirement. Although internalism is typically motivated by the need to account for the subject's reasoning and actions, it need not be (see footnote 38).

<sup>41</sup> Of course, not all Millians appeal to failures of transparency to account for the discrepancy between Millian contents and the subject's reasoning. An alternative strategy consists in appealing to pragmatic factors, beyond the theory of content (see for instance Soames 2002). Since the topic of this paper is transparency, not Millian theories per se, I shall not discuss this alternative proposal.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

I have argued that the transparency of content thesis does not have the semantic significance it is widely assumed to have. Both sides in the debate, compatibilists as well as incompatibilists, assume that subjects have meta-level beliefs about their first-order thoughts and states, and that these meta-beliefs play an important role in accounting for the subject's reasoning and actions. I have considered three alternative construals of the relevant meta-level beliefs and have argued that none of them supports this assumption.

It should perhaps be stressed that I do not wish to deny that there is a *connection* between semantics and transparency issues. It is no doubt true that certain semantic theories are in conflict with the transparency of meaning and content, while other theories are not. In the case of linguistic meaning, for example, the Fregean theory supports meaning transparency, whereas the Millian does not, and it is easy to see why. On the Fregean view, reflection on the use of *S*'s terms is a good source of meta-linguistic beliefs. For instance, if the subject reflects on the fact that she is willing to assent to 'Hesperus is Hesperus' but not to 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', on the Fregean view this justifies the subject in inferring that there is a difference in meaning between her terms. This is a direct result of the fact that on the Fregean view meaning is functionally transparent.<sup>42</sup> On the Millian view, however, reflections of this sort do not show that there is a difference in meaning – one would also have to know whether or not 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' indeed refer to the same thing and this is not, normally, something one can know on the basis of reflection alone. That is, if meaning is not functionally transparent (as on the Millian view) the speaker will not be able to form true,

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<sup>42</sup> Notice that it is less clear that there is a direct connection between meaning transparency and *internalism*: The claim that meaning is determined by internal features does not automatically imply that sameness and difference of meaning is access transparent. Rather, whether meaning is transparent depends on how the particular internalist position is spelled out – in particular, on whether the internalist accepts rationality constraints, such as Frege's principle. Indeed, internalism need not even be committed to functional transparency. I shall have to leave further discussion of this complex issue for another occasion.

meta-linguistic beliefs merely by reflecting on how she uses and is disposed to use her terms. Consequently, functional transparency is a necessary condition for access transparency. However, again, the converse does not hold. Access transparency is not a necessary condition for functional transparency, and the Fregean view does not *require* that meaning is access transparent: Even if the subject is not able to form meta-linguistic beliefs about sameness and difference in meaning, the fact that she takes a different attitude towards the two sentences suffices to motivate the appeal to Fregean senses.

Similar remarks apply to belief transparency. If we assume, with the Fregean, that belief contents are functionally transparent, then we have reasons to think that beliefs are access transparent: A subject can determine whether two beliefs are the same or not simply by reflecting on her first-order attitudes. For instance, asked whether she thinks that ‘Clay was a champ’ expresses the same belief as ‘Ali was a champ’, reflection on her attitudes tells Mary that she holds the first to be false and the second to be true and she can conclude from this that they express different beliefs. On the Millian view, however, it is clear that such reflection would not tell Mary anything about the sameness and difference of her beliefs. However, again, it would be a mistake to think that because there cannot be access transparency without functional transparency, functional transparency presupposes access transparency.

In conclusion, the semantically significant thesis is not the thesis that content (or belief) is access transparent but the thesis, underlying functional transparency, that it is essential to content that it serves to explain the subject’s reasoning and actions. This is an important, and disputed, thesis within foundational semantics, but it is not a thesis concerning knowledge of content.<sup>43</sup>

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