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Title

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Journal

UCLA School of Law Public Law & Legal Theory Series, 07(30)

Author

Greenberg, Mark

Publication Date

2007-11-17

Incomplete Understanding, Deference, and the Content of Thought¹

Mark Greenberg
UCLA

1. Introduction

Tyler Burge's influential arguments have convinced most philosophers that a thinker can have a thought involving a particular concept without fully grasping or having mastery of that concept. In Burge's (1979) famous example, a thinker who lacks mastery of the concept of arthritis nonetheless has thoughts involving that concept. It is generally supposed, however, that this phenomenon – *incomplete understanding*, for short – does not require us to reconsider in a fundamental way what it is for a thought to involve a particular concept. In this paper, I argue that the real significance of incomplete understanding has not been appreciated.

To the extent that theorists of content address the phenomenon of thoughts involving incompletely grasped contents at all, they tend to assume that some hand-

¹ I would like to thank Justin Broackes, Roger Crisp, Gilbert Harman, Kinch Hoekstra, Susan Hurley, Christopher Peacocke, Paul Pietroski, Ram Neta, James Pryor, Georges Rey, Gideon Rosen, Nicos Stavropoulos, Galen Strawson, Ralph Wedgwood, and Bernard Williams for helpful comments on earlier drafts. I am especially grateful to Martin Davies for many invaluable discussions. I am also grateful to the philosophy programs at the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the University of Oxford; and UCLA for the opportunity to present versions of the paper and to members of the audiences on those occasions for helpful comments.

waving about deference to other thinkers who fully grasp the relevant concepts will take care of the inconvenient cases of incomplete understanding. The main lesson of Burge's arguments is often taken to be that the content of language and thought is socially determined. On this picture, we do not need to change our basic view about what it is to have a concept; we just need to recognize that some thinkers can manage to have a concept by piggybacking on others. In contrast, on the view I defend, taking incomplete understanding seriously forces us to rethink some of our most basic assumptions about the nature of mental content. Deference is a red herring. The role of society in determining the content of thought is not the main lesson, but at most a useful clue as to the nature of mental and linguistic content.

Before proceeding further, I want to introduce a variety of examples of incomplete understanding. Once those examples are on the table, I will pause to summarize the argument of the paper and to give a roadmap.

2. Examples of incomplete understanding

The examples in this section illustrate different kinds of cases in which our everyday practices license the (apparent)² attribution of thoughts involving concepts that the thinkers incompletely grasp (in a sense that I will make more precise in the next section). More carefully put, the examples are supposed to suggest that in a wide range of cases, we are willing to attribute to a thinker a thought involving a particular concept despite

² I include the qualification "apparent" because, as I discuss below, whether the statements made in ordinary practice should be taken at face value or reinterpreted in some way is a theoretical question that cannot be resolved solely on the basis of ordinary practice. For brevity, I will usually omit this qualification.

facts that make it plausible that the thinker's dispositions in fact fall short of mastery of the concept.

As I mentioned above, theorists of content tend to assume that cases of incomplete understanding can be accounted for without substantial impact on the main theory of content by adding to the main theory a proviso about deference. In the examples that follow, however, there are reasons to doubt that the thinkers in question defer to others who have mastery of the relevant concepts. In my view, the examples suggest that we do not require deference in order to be willing to attribute to thinkers thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts. It would be a mistake, however, to be sidetracked by the issue of whether deference could be present in some of the examples. I will argue below (section 7), that even when deference is present, it does not enable leading theories of content to account for incomplete understanding.

Since I am using the examples to support a claim about our pre-theoretical, everyday practices of attitude attribution, it is important, in considering the examples, to put aside theoretical preconceptions or general views about what is required to have a thought involving a concept, and simply to ask whether, in an ordinary situation, you would be willing to characterize the person's thought with a "that"-clause that uses the concept-word.

In this paper, I offer only a brief, summary presentation of the examples. For a much richer discussion and a more developed account of their significance for theories of content, see Greenberg (2000; MSa).

In one category of cases, though there may be experts who fully grasp a concept, other people's use of the concept is not dependent on the experts' mastery. Philosophy students

often apparently have thoughts involving concepts they do not fully grasp. Suppose a student is beginning to think about conflicting moral obligations. The student may never have come across the terms “prima facie obligation” and “defeasible” and may be confused about the corresponding concepts, but the students’ groping ruminations may make it plausible to describe the student as coming to a thought such as: *a promise to ϕ creates only a prima facie obligation to ϕ , one that is defeasible*. Or a student might notice that an identity between a token mental state and a token physical state does not imply a type identity, without fully grasping the concepts of token and type.

Before most judges had encountered economic theory, judges arguably used economic concepts like EXPECTED UTILITY,³ OPPORTUNITY COST, and EXTERNALITY in their reasoning. In reading old judicial opinions, we might find it natural to attribute to a judge a thought that a precaution should be taken when the expected utility of taking the precaution is greater than its cost. We have no evidence that the judge has mastery of the relevant concepts, and in the circumstances it is plausible that he or she did not, but this does not seem to affect the naturalness of the attribution.

In the case of the philosophy students and the judges, the thinker may not be aware that anyone else uses the relevant concepts or that his or her mastery of the concepts is less than perfect. The student or judge may therefore have no tendency to defer to others.

Consider a different example: most people are not disposed to make the inferences that are arguably canonical of the concept of the material conditional. They lack a general, content-independent disposition to infer (when the question arises) from *P* and *not-Q* that it

³ I refer to concepts either by using upper-case letters or by using the expression “the concept of,” as in “the concept of expected utility.”

is not the case that *If P then Q* (more precisely, from the truth of *not-Q*, they are not disposed to infer that the truth of *P and not-Q* depends on the truth of *P*) (Wason 1969; Cosmides and Tooby 1992, pp. 181-206). We find it natural, nevertheless, to say that the people in question are making mistaken inferences involving the material conditional, rather than that their thoughts involve some different concept. To the extent that ordinary people defer to others with respect to the concept of material conditional, there is no reason to think that the others to whom they defer have the appropriate dispositions.

Young children provide an interesting variation on this kind of case. Sometimes a child is apparently disposed to misuse a word in a way that is highly resistant to correction. Sometimes the child is merely using the word to express a different concept from the one the adults express by the word. In some circumstances, however, we find it natural to think that the child is misusing the concept rather than using a different concept.

In another kind of case, a thinker attains mastery of some sophisticated concept, perhaps in school, but then, over time, as the thinker forgets, the thinker's dispositions change to the point where she has an incomplete grasp of the concept. If the thinker does not realize that she no longer has mastery of the concept, she will not defer to others. Yet she may still have thoughts involving the concept.

For some concepts, it is plausible that mastery requires an observational sensitivity to some property. (Perhaps the taste concept SALTY is an example.) Suppose that a few thinkers are actually sensitive not to the property in question, but to a different, intuitively bent property – perhaps salty-or-acidic-with-metallic-texture-and-very-cold) (though no one is aware of this difference). We can even suppose that the difference is rarely or never evident in practice. It may be plausible in some circumstances to say that the thinkers with

the bent sensitivity have thoughts involving the straight concept, though they incompletely grasp it.

Another kind of case involves historical thinkers and concepts the identity of which is constituted by their role in a theory. Regardless of how sophisticated and reflective the thinkers are, it may not be possible to master the concepts in question until the theory is available. A well-known example is that of Newton and the mathematical concept of a limit.⁴ It is extremely plausible that when Newton developed the calculus, he had thoughts involving that concept. For example, he had thoughts, often correct ones, about the limits of particular series. Yet arguably Newton did not fully grasp the concept of a limit, and neither did anyone else. It is not just that he was not able to give a precise account of it. Rather, the best efforts of this extremely sophisticated thinker to explicate a concept that he recognized to be crucial to his enterprise were confused.

A different kind of case involves the attribution to people in pre-scientific societies of thoughts involving concepts that refer to natural-kind properties. We tend to assume that pre-scientific people could think, for example, that a particular object or substance is water, gold, metal, or bone, where to think that something is, say, water is to think at least that it has the property of being water. In order to have such a thought, a thinker must have some concept that, even if not a natural-kind concept, has the same reference as the relevant natural-kind concept. I will not argue the point here,⁵ but it is plausible that of the potentially available concepts, only natural-kind concepts have the right reference. But we

⁴ Christopher Peacocke suggested the relevance of the example to me in conversation in 1993 or 1994.

Peacocke (1998, pp. 49-54) has discussed this case in print. Tyler Burge may have originally brought the example into contemporary philosophical discussions of incomplete understanding.

⁵ I argue this point and related ones in Greenberg MSA.

do not assume that pre-scientific people had the dispositions that would constitute mastery of the relevant natural-kind concepts. (On a plausible account of what is required to have mastery of a natural-kind concept,⁶ say, *gold*, a thinker must be disposed, among other things, to move from the thought that X is gold to the thought that X has the same underlying nature as other samples of gold – if the question arises.) So our assumptions about content countenance thoughts involving concepts that *no one* has mastered.

Ethical concepts may provide yet another type of example. On a plausible view, in order to have mastery of, say, the concept CRUELTY or TREACHERY, a thinker must (among other things) be disposed, when she judges that an act is cruel (or treacherous), to judge, roughly, that there is a reason not to do the act, or that it is, to that extent (though not all things considered) wrong (or at least she must be disposed to do so if the question arises). But it is a familiar observation that we are willing to attribute to thinkers thoughts involving ethical concepts such as CRUELTY even when the thinkers are not disposed to make the appropriate judgments about reasons for action.⁷ The thinker who fails to judge that an action's being cruel is any reason not to perform the action may be aware that others think differently, but disagree with them. In that case, he will not defer to them. On my

⁶ See, *e.g.*, Peacocke 1992, pp. 26, 144; Fodor 1990, p. 115.

⁷ As I explain in Greenberg 2009, my suggestion that thinkers can have thoughts involving moral concepts without mastery of them makes it possible to reconcile the conflicting convictions that thinkers can have thoughts involving moral concepts without being appropriately motivated or making the appropriate judgments about reasons for action (*e.g.*, Brink, 1986, p. 30; 1997, pp. 21-23) and that mastery of a moral term or concept requires the appropriate connection between judgment and motivation (*e.g.*, Smith, 1994, pp. 71-76). Michael Smith (1994, pp. 66-71) provides a concise discussion of the conflicting convictions.

view, in fact, whole communities can have thoughts involving thick ethical concepts without having the dispositions that are necessary for mastery of those concepts.

Burge (1986b) has developed a very different kind of example. One who knows a term's ordinary use could develop a "nonstandard" theory about the objects to which it applies, thereby coming to doubt even the characterizations most central to giving the meaning of the term (1986b, pp. 707-710). For example, a thinker who fully understands the term "sofa" and is fluent in its use could propose as a testable, empirical hypothesis, and could even come to believe, that sofas are not items of furniture made for sitting on, but religious artifacts or works of art. In that case, the thinker arguably would no longer have mastery of the concept of a sofa.

Again, the thinker who believes a nonstandard theory obviously does not defer with respect to the relevant concept to other members of the community who believe the standard theory, for she knows how they apply the concept and believes they are wrong. Although Burge does not address the issue explicitly, the argument does not depend on the assumption that other members of the thinker's community continue to believe the proposition in question.

The examples I have just summarized and others like them make it clear that our ordinary practices countenance the apparent attribution of non-deference dependent thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts.

One qualification. The point of the examples does not depend on a claim that our everyday practice uses the notion of full grasp (or incomplete grasp) of a concept. Rather, our everyday practice licenses the attribution of a thought involving a particular concept despite the fact that the thinker, so far as the attributer knows, plausibly lacks

dispositions that would in fact constitute mastery of the relevant concept. The point does not even depend on whether the thinkers in the examples lack full grasp of their concepts. (It can of course be debated whether a thinker in an example fully grasps the concept in question, and resolving that question may require further specification of the example.) Rather, the examples attempt to establish that ordinary practice does not pay close attention to the facts that would be relevant to whether the thinkers have mastery of their concepts; everyday practice licenses the attribution of thoughts involving the concept without regard to the details of the relevant dispositions, even when the facts raise a serious doubt about the thinker's mastery.

A common reaction to the examples is to insist that the thinkers in the examples *could not* have the relevant thoughts, or that no sense has been given to the claim that they do. The objector does not deny that everyday practice would license the apparent attributions, but claims that the thinkers in question cannot or should not really be taken to have the attitudes in question. The reaction thus is not an objection to the claim that everyday practice countenances the attribution of attitudes involving incompletely grasped concepts.

An objector can, of course, accept the claim that ordinary practice countenances such (apparent) attributions, and argue that ordinary practice should not be taken at face value. It might be argued, for example, that the (apparent) attributions are just a convenient way of talking or are attributions of thoughts involving different, but related, concepts that

the thinker fully grasps. (A different tack would be to argue that the attributions are all false.)⁸

If ordinary practice countenances (apparent) attributions of non-deference-dependent thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts, the question arises why we should attempt to reinterpret such attributions. Why think that the attributions involving incompletely grasped concepts that are not based on deference are not to be taken seriously, while attributions based on deference or attributions of thoughts involving fully grasped concepts are genuine attributions of content? In this paper, rather than responding to attempted reinterpretations of the examples,⁹ I want to argue that such attempts lack a good theoretical motivation. Let me now summarize the argument.

3. Summary of the argument

As I have suggested, leading theories of content are designed to address cases of full grasp. We will see (in section 5) that, at least aside from cases involving deference, these theories have no prospect of accounting for incomplete understanding. The source of the problem is not in the details, but in a fundamental presupposition shared by most prominent theories of content, despite their apparent diversity (section 6). Thus, a heavy burden falls on the assumption that a proviso about deference enables leading theories to

⁸ A different kind of objection from the one mentioned in the text holds that the conditions for mastery of the concept are weaker than the example assumes, so that the thinker in fact has mastery of the concept. This strategy for responding to the examples has a strong limitation. Mastery of a concept must be tacit appreciation of its identity conditions, which are necessarily strong enough to differentiate the concept from all other concepts. See Greenberg MSa.

⁹ For responses to attempted reinterpretations, see Greenberg MSa.

account for incomplete understanding – the *deference assumption*, for short. Without the deference assumption, leading theories of content have no prospect of accounting for incomplete understanding. Given the assumption, leading theories of content can account for incomplete understanding, so long as it is plausible that the thinkers defer to others who have mastery of the relevant concepts.

The deference assumption thus provides a powerful motivation for reinterpreting non-deference cases as something other than genuine cases of incomplete understanding (or as deference cases). If an appeal to deference is to provide an adequate account of incomplete understanding, all genuine cases of incomplete understanding must be based on deference. In other work, I consider and respond to a number of objections that try to reinterpret non-deference cases. As long as such objections seem to be driven by a powerful theoretical reasons, however, responding to particular objections will only take us so far. In this paper, I therefore take a different tack.

My argument, in a nutshell, will be that an appeal to deference cannot bear the weight that is placed on it (section 7). Even when deference is present, it does not enable leading theories of content to explain incomplete understanding. Such theories are no better able to account for deference cases than for non-deference cases. The theoretical motivation for trying to reinterpret the non-deference cases therefore evaporates, and the attempted reinterpretations are beside the point. Once we have accepted that there are genuine cases of incomplete understanding, we need to rethink what it is for a thought to involve a particular concept.

A natural response to cases of incomplete understanding, as some have recognized, is to hypothesize that there must be previously unrecognized determinants of

content, such as society and the world.¹⁰ (An appeal to deference can be viewed as an instance – other people are a possible additional determinant of content.) But a crucial question has been neglected: what is it for a thought to involve a particular concept, such that society and the world would play this role? Or, more generally, what view of the content of thought would make sense of incomplete understanding – of the possibility that contents go beyond thinkers’ dispositions (in a way that I will make more precise below)?

My tentative proposal, very roughly, is that what it is for a thought to involve a particular concept is, at least in part,¹¹ for the thinker to be responsible to certain standards distinctive of that concept (section 8). This *responsibility view* of content has the potential to explain cases of incompletely grasped contents: they are cases in which thinkers are responsible to standards that they are not disposed to satisfy. On this view, society is just one possible source of standards, and deference is just one mechanism by which a thinker can become responsible to a standard.

Here, in brief, is the plan for the remainder of the paper. In section 4, I begin by explaining the notions of concept mastery and incomplete understanding. In section 5, I show that at least without deference to other thinkers, leading theories of content have difficulty explaining how a thinker with incomplete grasp of a concept could have a thought involving the concept. Next, in section 6, I suggest that this difficulty stems from a fundamental presupposition shared by leading theories of content, despite their

¹⁰ E.g., Lewis 1983, pp. 370-377; 1984, pp. 222-229; Putnam 1975, pp. 245-246.

¹¹ Responsibility to standards might be only part of the story, though I will usually omit this qualification. See note 49 below.

large surface differences. In section 7, I turn to my argument that deference does not do the work it is supposed to do, and thus that there is no good theoretical motivation for reinterpreting non-deference cases. Finally, in section 8, I suggest that a theory of content based on the responsibility view would have the potential to explain both deference- and non-deference-based cases of incomplete understanding.

4. Concept mastery

A few preliminaries. I use the term “thought” as a generic term for propositional attitudes, rather than their contents. Concepts are the components of the contents of thoughts. Since words are the components of the sentences that express the contents of thoughts, words are associated with concepts. (If a word is ambiguous, it is associated with more than one concept.) Thus, concepts are closely related to word meanings, though there are many concepts that are not associated with particular words. For ease of exposition, when I want to say that a particular concept is a component of the content of a thought, I say that the thought (or the thought’s content) *involves* that concept.

There are a variety of views about what individuates concepts – about the nature of concepts’ fundamental identity conditions. For example, some philosophers think that each concept is individuated by its canonical or defining connections with other concepts (or by canonical or defining connections between thoughts involving the concept and other thoughts or mental states); others think that each concept is individuated at the level of reference – by the concept’s connection to the property that is its reference. I will not focus on the question of what makes a concept the concept it is. Rather, I am primarily interested in the question of, given a concept’s identity conditions, what makes it the case that a thought involves that concept?

The term “having a concept” (and similarly “possessing a concept”) is ambiguous in a way that can lead us to overlook the possibility that a person can have thoughts involving a concept without having mastery of it. In one sense, to say that a person “has” a concept is to say that the person has thoughts (or is capable of having thoughts) that involve that concept. In another sense, to say that a person “has” a concept is to say that the person has mastery or full grasp of the concept. It is a substantive question whether a person must have mastery or full grasp of a concept in order to have thoughts involving it, *i.e.*, whether a person must have a concept in the second sense in order to have it in the first sense. Since this question is central to this paper, I will mark the distinction by using the term “having” a concept exclusively in the first sense and using the term “mastery” (or “full grasp”) of a concept for the second sense. Thus, in my terminology, to *have* a given concept is to have thoughts involving the concept, not to have mastery of it.

As I use the terms, a person who “incompletely grasps” or “incompletely understands” a concept is simply one who lacks mastery of the concept. (Notice that I am using the terms to cover what are intuitively¹² two kinds of cases: cases of partial understanding and cases of incorrect understanding.) Also, I sometimes use the term “incomplete understanding” as a shorthand for the phenomenon of thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts.

So what is mastery of a concept? There is a familiar, though vague, notion of full grasp or mastery of a concept, which parallels the notion of mastery of a word or term. Fully grasping a concept does not necessarily require knowing everything there is to

¹² I use the same term because I do not think that the two kinds of cases differ in a theoretically important way, or at least in a way that is important for my purposes here.

know, or even much of anything, about the objects or properties to which the concept applies (just as understanding a word does not necessarily require knowing much about the objects to which the word applies). In general, having mastery of a concept is a matter of understanding *the concept*. Therefore, what is required to master a given concept depends on the identity conditions of the concept – on what makes that concept the concept it is. We can make things more precise by saying that having mastery of a concept is having a disposition (or set of dispositions) that constitutes¹³ tacit appreciation of the concept's identity conditions.¹⁴ This formulation makes clear both that having mastery of a concept is a matter of understanding what is essential to the concept, rather than knowing about the things to which it applies, and that having mastery of a concept does not require being able to articulate one's understanding.

I want to emphasize one thing: that a person has mastery of a concept does not imply that the person will, in practice, always make the appropriate inferences or always apply the concept correctly. A person who appreciates a concept's identity conditions may make mistakes for diverse reasons. She may be distracted or drunk or have poor eyesight. In the terms originally introduced by Chomsky, that the person has mastery of the concept is a claim about the person's competence, not about her performance. Thus, we need to understand the notion of a disposition in a way that allows that a disposition

¹³ Depending on how we understand dispositions, dispositions might be more naturally thought of as constituting tacit appreciation or being underwritten by such an appreciation. I will not enter into issues about the nature of dispositions, and will generally talk for convenience of the dispositions constituting a tacit appreciation of the concept's identity conditions.

¹⁴ Some views of concepts and content might not offer a way of making sense of concept mastery, or might not make it possible to make sense of it in terms of appreciation of a concept's identity conditions.

may not be manifested in everyday performance. As I will use the notion, a person can have a disposition to ϕ in circumstances C,¹⁵ even if the person sometimes, or even regularly, does not ϕ in circumstances C. Interfering factors or a failure of background conditions may prevent the disposition from being activated.¹⁶

I will not try to give a general and precise account of what dispositions constitute tacit appreciation of a concept's identity conditions. Instead, I will comment very roughly on what mastery of a concept would be on the two dominant theories of concept individuation.

Consider the theory that each concept is individuated by certain canonical or defining connections with other concepts. On such a view of concept individuation, a plausible position is that a thinker has mastery of a particular concept if and only if she has a disposition to make the concept's canonical inferences or judgments when, and only when, appropriate. (A canonical inference from one set of propositions to another is appropriate, roughly, when the question arises what follows from the first set of propositions.) So to have mastery of the concept WALK is, among other things, to be

¹⁵ When I say that a person "has a disposition to ϕ in circumstances C," I mean to include the circumstances within the scope of the disposition. That is, the disposition is a disposition <to ϕ in circumstances C>, and the person has that disposition regardless of whether the circumstances are C.

¹⁶ Indeed, on my view, a person can be disposed to ϕ even if the person never actually ϕ s, for in all actual cases there may be interfering factors or a failure of background conditions. But I do not need such a strong position for purposes of this paper.

disposed to move, when appropriate, from the belief that John walks to the belief that John moves.¹⁷

Now consider the theory that each concept is individuated by its connection to the property that is its reference. On such a view of concept individuation, a thinker has mastery of a particular concept if and only if she has a disposition that constitutes a tacit appreciation of the concept's connection to its reference. It is more difficult to give a general account of what such a disposition might be than it was to give the corresponding account in the case of canonical-connection theories of concept identity. A crude example would be a disposition to apply the concept, when appropriate, to instances of the concept's reference and not to other objects. (It is appropriate so to apply the concept when, for example, the question arises whether an object falls under the concept.) Such a disposition might constitute a tacit appreciation of the concept in the case of some concepts. So to have mastery of the concept RED might be, among other things, to be disposed, when appropriate, to apply the concept to red things and not to non-red things. (Notice that a disposition merely to distinguish instances of the concept's reference from instances of other properties would not be sufficient for mastery of the concept. Being disposed to discriminate instances of the relevant property need involve no appreciation of the concept's identity conditions.)

¹⁷ Let me note one complication. If the thinker's making the right inferences were contingent on the thinker's other beliefs the thinker's disposition arguably would not constitute mastery of the concept. The disposition would not constitute an appreciation that the inference is required by the concept's identity, rather than, for example, supported by collateral beliefs. I will assume that part of what it is for the thinker to be disposed to make the inferences *when, and only when, appropriate* is that the thinker's disposition to make the relevant inference not be contingent on the thinker's other beliefs.

In the case of other concepts, however – ELECTRON, for example – the appropriate disposition would not be a disposition to apply the concept to its referents, but some more complex disposition to connect the concept with its reference. Even if we cannot offer a general account (for a reference based theory of concept identity) of what dispositions constitute tacit appreciation of an arbitrary concept's identity conditions, we can at least say that for a thinker to have such a tacit appreciation, it would be *sufficient* that the thinker be disposed to make judgments involving the concept in a way that tracks the concept's referents. There might be other, more subtle ways in which patterns of dispositions could constitute tacit appreciation of a concept's connection with its reference, but a disposition to use the concept in a way that tracks its reference is the right sort of disposition. For purposes of this paper, this sufficient condition for concept mastery will be all that is needed.

Two clarifications are needed. First, the way in which I have characterized concept mastery leaves it entirely open what mediates the relevant dispositions. In particular, on some views of the nature of dispositions, the mechanism could include another person or persons. That is, it is possible that a thinker who intuitively has no understanding of a concept's identity conditions might nonetheless, by relying on another person, have the appropriate dispositions. Although it may seem odd to use the term in this way, I will allow that a person who has the relevant dispositions has mastery of the concept, even if his having those dispositions depends on other people. The possibility of a thinker's having mastery of a concept by relying on another person is much plausible on a reference-based view of concept individuation than on a canonical-connection-based view. The reason, crudely put, is that a concept's reference is (in many cases) out there

in the world where other people can help a thinker to connect the concept to it. In contrast, it is more difficult to see how other people could help a thinker to recognize which transitions between the thinker's mental states correspond to a concept's canonical connections with other concepts.

The clarification that concept mastery *could* be mediated by other people does not imply that every thinker who defers to others who fully grasp a particular concept will have mastery of the concept. In section 7, I will argue that deference to others is not in general an effective way of acquiring the dispositions that constitute mastery of the concept.

The second clarification concerns the idea of a disposition "to make judgments involving the concept in a way that tracks the concept's referents." I have been deliberately vague in this formulation in order to avoid a difficulty. The difficulty, as I now explain, is not mine, but that of informational (or covariational) theorists of content. Informational theorists of content hold that what makes it the case that a concept is a particular concept, say, RED is that it covaries with instances of redness. The difficulty that we are now concerned with is that of specifying which occurrences of the concept – which type of mental state involving the concept – must covary with the concept's referents. For example, desires and wishes that have the concept as an element of their content need not covary with the concept's referents. The occurrence of the concept RED in the desire for a red tie need not covary with instances of redness. And the same is true for many beliefs involving the concept (for example, beliefs about absent objects, conditional beliefs, negative beliefs, and so on). The occurrence of the concept RED in

the belief that there are no red things around here need not covary with instances of redness.

My present point is that this difficulty is the same difficulty that we face in specifying what kind of disposition to use the concept in a way that tracks its referents is sufficient for concept mastery (for reference-based theories of concept identity). If informational theorists can find an appropriate type of mental state for the relation of covariation that lies at the core of their theories, that type of mental state can be used to formulate the sufficient condition for mastery of a concept. For example, some informational theorists have written in terms of *tokenings* of a concept. Suppose that there is a mental state (or event) of tokening a concept and that it is the appropriate mental state with which to formulate informational theories of content. Then we can say that it is sufficient to have mastery of a concept that one be disposed to token the concept in a way that tracks its referents. If, on the other hand, there is no appropriate type of mental state for the relation of covariation that lies at the core of informational theories, informational theories are non-starters, and my criticisms of them are beside the point. In this paper, I therefore set aside the difficulty for informational theories of content and assume that there is an appropriate mental state. I will use the term “tokening of a concept” (and its cognates) for that mental state.

I think that what I have said about concept mastery for each theory of concept individuation is plausible. But nothing will turn on how we should use the terms “mastery” or “full grasp” of a concept. As I have said, I want to show that leading theories of content cannot account for a certain phenomenon. The phenomenon is that thinkers who lack certain dispositions – the ones that, for each type of theory of concepts,

I have called mastery of a concept – nevertheless seem to be able to have thoughts involving the relevant concept. Although I think it is helpful to understand the issues in terms of concept mastery and incomplete understanding, the merits of the core argument can be evaluated independently of whether my use of “concept mastery” is apt. Indeed, the view of the content of thought that I propose does not use or require a notion of concept mastery.

As I explain in section 5, the main reason I use a notion of concept mastery in this paper is to show that difficulties faced by apparently very different theories of content – informational theories on the one hand and inferential-role theories on the other – stem from a common feature. The two theories begin from very different views of concepts. But, as I argue in section 5, *modulo* those different views of concepts, they arguably both have the same consequence. I use the notion of concept mastery to bring out the commonality: both kinds of theories have the consequence that, in order to have thoughts involving a particular concept, a thinker must have mastery of the concept or at least defer to others who have mastery of it (though mastery of a concept is a rather different thing for the two kinds of theories, given their different underlying views of concepts).

5. Leading theories of content and incomplete understanding

I want to turn to the question of why leading theories of content have difficulty allowing for the possibility of incomplete understanding. By “leading theories of content,” I mean to encompass most inferential-role and informational (or covariational) theories of content.¹⁸ In this section, I set aside the topic of deference to other thinkers. I argue that,

¹⁸ I also include theories that are hybrids of informational and inferential-role theories. I will not discuss hybrid views separately because the arguments that I make with respect to informational and inferential-

at least without deference to other thinkers, leading theories of content cannot explain how a thinker with incomplete grasp of a concept could have a thought involving the concept. In section 7, I address deference to other thinkers.

Inferential-role theories are the most prominent kind of theories of content that take concepts to be individuated by connections with other concepts. An inferential-role theory of content holds, very roughly, that what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept is that the thinker deploys a disposition to move between mental states that is appropriately isomorphic to the concept's canonical or defining connections to other concepts. But if concepts are individuated by their connections with other concepts, to have mastery of a concept is to be disposed to make the concept's defining mental moves when appropriate. (More intuitively, a thinker will not be disposed to make the right transitions between mental states unless the thinker tacitly appreciates which transitions those are.) We can thus see why the basic form of an inferential-role theory raises a difficulty about how a thinker can have a thought involving a concept without having mastery of it. I will discuss a representative theory in more detail below.

The corresponding point holds for informational or covariational theories, which are the most prominent kind of theories of content that take concepts to be individuated by their reference. As I will use the term, an informational theory of content holds, very roughly again, that what makes it the case that thinker's concept is a particular concept,

role accounts apply straightforwardly to hybrids. Ruth Millikan's (1984) biology-based theory of content is not an inferential-role or informational theory of content, and it is one of the few contemporary theories of content that I do not mean to include within my use of the term "leading theories of content." As I discuss in section 8, Millikan's theory is a responsibility-view-based theory of content. Also, as I say in note 20, I do not mean to include accounts of reference that appeal to historical chains.

say, RED, is that the thinker's tokenings¹⁹ of the concept covary reliably with instances of redness.²⁰ The basic point is that the relevant occurrences of the concept will not in general covary with the concept's referents unless the thinker has a tacit appreciation of the connection between the concept and its reference. It is possible that reliable covariation could be mediated by another thinker's appreciation of the connection between the concept and its reference. As noted above, however, the appropriate dispositions, however mediated, count as mastery of the concept.²¹ We can thus see why the basic form of an informational theory raises a difficulty about how a thinker can have a thought involving a concept without having mastery of it. Again, I will discuss a representative theory in more detail below.

¹⁹ As mentioned above (p. 20), I will waive the problem of which type of mental state involving the concept must covary with the concept's referents, and simply allow the informational theorist a notion of concept tokenings.

²⁰ I am thus using "informational" as a synonym for "covariational." Thus, I intend to exclude accounts that hold that what makes it the case that a thinker's concept has a particular reference is a historical connection to that reference. Such accounts cannot be the basis for a full theory of what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept since the accounts take for granted intentional notions such as intentions, baptisms, and ostensions. Kripke (1980, pp. 88 n. 38, 93-97) himself was clear that his seminal discussion of the role of historical chains of communication did not offer the prospect of a theory of reference that could be spelled out without the notion of reference. In section 8, I briefly discuss Kripke's views on the role of other people in determining reference.

²¹ Similarly, even if a thinker relies on instruments, if the thinker has dispositions that constitute tacit appreciation of the connection between concept and reference, the thinker counts as having mastery of the concept.

Thus far, all that I have shown is that the basic form of inferential-role and informational theories of content predisposes them to have difficulty explaining incomplete understanding. It might be objected that sophisticated inferential-role and informational theories of content diverge enough from the basic form of such theories that they can account for incomplete understanding. In particular, such theories notoriously struggle with what we can call “the problem of error.”²² The problem is to explain how a thinker’s dispositions can determine that a thinker is using a particular concept, if the thinker is systematically disposed to make what are intuitively mistakes in the use of the concept. Or, to put it another way, the problem is to explain why a thinker who apparently makes mistakes in using one concept is not correctly using a different concept. In their attempts to allow for systematic error, inferential-role and informational theories qualify what a thinker must be disposed to do in order to have thoughts involving a given concept. Thus, the objector might suggest that sophisticated current theories can allow for incomplete understanding.

It is true that leading theories of content do not maintain that a thinker has to be perfect in using a concept. But as I emphasized above, concept mastery also does not require perfect performance. The question is whether leading theories of content imply that, in order to have thoughts involving a concept, a thinker must have dispositions that are sufficient for mastery of the concept.

²² Using this label is a simplification. There are a cluster of related issues, some of which are arguably more fundamental than allowing for error. For one thing, that a tokening of a concept is not caused by an instance of the concept’s reference does not imply that it is an error. For example, tokenings of a concept may be caused by other thoughts.

To solve the problem of error, theorists of content adopt a variety of devices. As we will see, the basic idea behind most proposals is to allow for mistakes in performance, while holding to the idea that the thinker has the appropriate competence. Thus, the proposals typically have the consequence that mastery of the concept is necessary in order to have thoughts involving it.

The most common response to the problem of error is to appeal to ideal or optimal epistemic conditions or to *ceteris paribus* clauses.²³ But to make the right

²³ Stampe 1977; Fodor 1980/1990; Stalnaker, 1987, pp. 19, 37, 66-68; Pettit, 1993, pp. 93-94; Pietroski and Rey 1995, pp. 106-108. The other main response to the problem of error has been to appeal to community rather than individual dispositions. *E.g.*, Kripke, 1982, pp. 86-112. See Boghossian's (1989, pp. 534-536) excellent survey. (The response has been more popular for theorists concerned with linguistic, rather than mental, content.) We need to distinguish at least two different roles that the community could play. First, other people could enable the individual thinker to have the dispositions necessary to have a concept on an inferential-role or informational theory of content. I discuss this possibility in section 7 under the label *disposition-mechanism* account of the role of deference. Second, a theory could hold that what makes it the case that a particular concept figures in a thinker's thought is that the thinker's community has certain dispositions. According to this possibility, the community's dispositions, not the individual thinker's, constitutively determine the content of the thinker's thought. I will use the term "community" only for this second kind of account.

A community-based account (of this second sort) is not an informational or inferential-role theory of content. The point is not a narrow terminological one. According to inferential-role and informational theories, what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept is that the thinker deploys a disposition that corresponds in a certain way – appropriate isomorphism for inferential-role theories or covariation for informational theories – to the concept. (See section 6 below for development of this way of putting things.) A community-based theory would hold that what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept is the thinker's membership in a certain community (which has certain

inferences (or to token a concept in a way that covaries with its referents) under ideal epistemic conditions or other things being equal requires a tacit appreciation of the concept's identity conditions. To put it another way, a thinker who will make a concept's canonical inferences under ideal conditions or when nothing interferes is precisely a thinker who has a disposition to make those inferences. The point of an appeal to ideal conditions is, after all, precisely to allow for the fact that a thinker who has the relevant competence may not manifest it if conditions are less than ideal. Appealing to ideal conditions will not help if the thinker lacks the relevant competence.²⁴

A few theories that fall within the inferential-role and informational categories do not appeal to ideal conditions. It will be helpful to consider two such theories, Christopher Peacocke's (1992) inferential-role theory and Jerry Fodor's (1990) informational theory. Each theory is highly sophisticated and has been developed in detail, and each has garnered much attention. The two theories also have the virtue for our purposes of being extremely different from each other. For these reasons, I will use the two as representative examples of inferential-role and informational theories. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly indicate why, at least leaving deference to the side, these two theories have difficulty accounting for incomplete understanding. I will

dispositions). Such a theory presupposes a fundamentally different understanding of the content of thought than a theory that explains what it is for a thought to involve a particular content in terms of the thinker's deploying a particular disposition. In section 8, I touch on the question of what understanding of the content of thought would make sense of this role for community.

²⁴ Some theories directly explain what it is for the thinker to have a concept in terms of the thinker having the underlying competence. See, *e.g.*, Rey 1998; Peacocke 1998a. In such cases, it is obvious that the theory will have difficulty accounting for incomplete understanding.

return to the two theories and their potential to account for incomplete understanding in sections 7.2 (Fodor) and 7.3 (Peacocke).

Peacocke's (1992) theory makes the role of concept mastery very clear. He first offers an account of concepts and concept mastery. According to this account, each concept has a "possession condition," which is a condition for fully grasping the concept, and that condition is the concept's fundamental identity condition (pp. 1-27). Peacocke uses his account of concepts to explain what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept and to address various other issues in the theory of content.²⁵ As we will see (section 7.3), the explanatory power of Peacocke's theory, including his account of what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept, depends on the assumption that thinkers have mastery of their concepts.²⁶

Fodor's theory does not employ a notion of concept mastery. But it nevertheless follows from his account of the content of thought that a thinker who lacks mastery of a concept (given what mastery of a concept is for a reference-based theory of concept

²⁵ For Peacocke's account of the content of thought, see 1992, pp. 107-111, 134-145, 177-197; for his treatment of Davidsonian radical interpretation, see 1992, pp. 37-38; for his account of Gareth Evans's (1982, pp. 100-105) generality constraint, see 1992, pp. 42-45.

²⁶ Peacocke officially acknowledges that thinkers can have thoughts involving a concept without satisfying its possession condition (1992, pp. 27-30). He proposes adding a proviso about deference to his theory to take care of cases of incomplete understanding (p. 29). As we will discuss in section 7.3, however, Peacocke does not integrate this proviso into his theory. After pointing out that thinkers can have thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts and suggesting that deference can account for such cases, he ignores the issue and often relies on the assumption that thinkers fully grasp the concepts that figure in the contents of their thoughts.

identity) will not be able to have thoughts involving the concept.²⁷ Instead of covariance or causal relations, Fodor's account deals in laws connecting worldly properties to (the property of causing) the tokening of mental symbols. Let us say that such a law L covering the tokening of a symbol S is *primary* just in case all other laws covering the tokening of S (metaphysically) depend on L, but L does not depend on any of those laws. In these terms, according to Fodor's theory, what makes a property P the reference of a mental symbol is that there is a law linking P to (the property of causing) the symbol's tokening, *and that law is primary*.

There are good reasons to be skeptical that laws covering the tokening of symbols – if, indeed, there be such laws – fall into the appropriate asymmetric dependence patterns.²⁸ In order to evaluate whether Fodor's theory can account for incomplete understanding, let us grant for purposes of argument that theory can account for at least typical cases in which the thinker has mastery of the concepts that figure in her thoughts.²⁹ Roughly, what we need to assume is that dispositions that constitute a tacit

²⁷ As pointed out in section 4, we are using the notion of concept mastery in a way that allows that mastery may be maintained by deference to others.

²⁸ I argue elsewhere (Greenberg 2000) that the relevant laws do not do so (and am also critical of the prior claim that the laws obtain). As I explain in the next footnote, Fodor's official view is neutral as to whether there actually are any laws of the relevant kind and, if so, whether they fall into the appropriate asymmetric dependence patterns.

²⁹ Officially, Fodor tries to give only *sufficient* conditions for mental content. Therefore, it is consistent with Fodor's theory that it accounts for no actual thought contents. Even if there actually are no primary laws, or, for that matter, no laws governing the tokening of mental representations at all, Fodor's theory could be true. In that case, however, the interest of the theory would be considerably diminished. For one thing, it would not account for the actual cases of incomplete understanding that we are concerned with. (Indeed, for all that

appreciation of the connection between a concept and a property P generate a law connecting the tokening of the appropriate mental symbol to P and ensure that that law is primary.

We can now see why Fodor's theory has difficulty accounting for incomplete understanding. Consider a thinker who lacks mastery of a concept *C*, tacitly connecting the concept to a property *Q*, which is not *C*'s reference. Given the assumptions needed in order for Fodor's theory to account for cases of concept mastery, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the thinker's dispositions will generate a law connecting the tokening of the appropriate mental symbol "S" to *Q* and will ensure that that law will be primary. Thus, according to Fodor's theory, "S" expresses a concept whose reference is *Q*, which implies that it does not express *C*. In other words, Fodor's theory implies that the thinker has, not incomplete grasp of *C*, but full grasp of a different concept.³⁰

Fodor's theory claims, it could be the case that in the only possible worlds in which thinker's satisfy Fodor's conditions for content, thinkers do not have thoughts involving incompletely grasped contents.) It would also be difficult to evaluate the truth of the theory. Fodor himself tries to support his theory by arguing that in actual cases, asymmetric dependencies plausibly fall the way his theory suggests (1990, pp. 97-100, 114-116). For these and other reasons, which I discuss elsewhere (Greenberg 2000), I think it is fair to set aside Fodor's official claim to offer only sufficient conditions for content and to consider how the theory fares in actual cases (and other cases in which it is not stipulated that thinkers satisfy Fodor's conditions).

³⁰ The example involves a thinker who (tacitly) connects the wrong property with a concept. In other kinds of cases, the thinker will simply be confused. It is a difficult question how likely it is that there will be a primary law in such cases. If there is no primary law, Fodor's theory, since it offers only sufficient conditions for content, has nothing to say. It certainly cannot account for incomplete understanding in such cases.

In sum, Fodor's theory has the consequence that thinkers who have cottoned on to the wrong property will not have not the concept of which they lack mastery but a different concept that refers to that property. For all that we have said so far, however, deference to other thinkers may be a mechanism that ensures that thinkers that by themselves do not appreciate the connection between a concept and its reference nevertheless have mastery of the concept and thus the appropriate patterns of laws. We will examine this possibility in section 7.2.

It is possible to create theories of content that, at least superficially, have the basic structure of informational or inferential-role theories, but do not imply that a thinker must have mastery of a concept in order to have thoughts involving it. Fred Dretske's (1981) learning-conditions-based theory is an example. A thinker can certainly have applied a concept to instances of its reference during "the learning situation" without the thinker's now having mastery of the concept. It is easy to generate further such theories: simply specify that what determines that the thinker's concept is C is that under some special condition S, the thinker would be disposed to make the concept's canonical inferences (or apply the concept to its reference) when appropriate. Unless S is something like ideal conditions or the absence of interference, it will not follow that a thinker must have mastery of the concept in order to have thoughts involving it. Of course, in general, such theories are not going to be plausible. In the next section, I make a suggestion about why it is so apparently plausible to adopt theories that imply that thinkers must have mastery of a concept in order to have thoughts involving it. My point for now is that most inferential-role and informational theories of content have the consequence that, aside

from deference, a thinker cannot have a thought involving a concept without having mastery of it.

6. *The disposition view*

Let us distinguish a range of possible positions about what is required for a thinker to have a concept. The positions differ with respect to who, if anyone, must have mastery of the concept in order for a thinker to have thoughts involving it.

- 1) *Extreme Position (EP)*: The thinker must herself have mastery of the concept.
- 2) *Demanding Position (DP)*: The thinker must have mastery of the concept or defer to other thinkers, at least some of whom have mastery of it individually.
- 3) *Collective Position*: The thinker must have mastery of the concept or defer to other thinkers. If none of the other thinkers have mastery of the concept individually, they must do so *collectively*.
- 4) *Lenient Position*: No one need have mastery of the concept, individually or collectively.

In these terms, what we saw above is that informational and inferential-role theories of content are apparently committed to the Extreme Position, or at least to the Demanding Position. (The Demanding Position seems to be widely accepted, but, as noted above, a theorist who rejects the Extreme Position in favor of the Demanding Position holds not merely that deference *can* enable a thinker to have the dispositions that constitute mastery of a concept, but that deference is sufficient to enable a thinker who lacks mastery of a

concept to have thoughts involving it.) There are a variety of other possible positions. I list the Collective Position and the Lenient Position to give a sense of the possibilities.

Informational and inferential-roles of theories of content look extremely different. And there are very large differences within those two general kinds of theories. Yet, I am claiming, both kinds of theories have difficulty accounting for incomplete understanding (with the possible exception of deference cases). What is the source of this difficulty?

It may seem obvious that any plausible theory of content will hold that a thinker cannot have a thought involving a concept without having mastery of it. If concepts are individuated at the level of reference, it might be asked rhetorically, how could a thinker who lacks an appreciation of the connection between a concept and its reference have the concept? And, similarly, if concepts are individuated by certain defining inferences, how could a thinker who lacks an appreciation of a concept's defining inferences have the concept?

I suggest that the Extreme Position seems so obvious not because it is true but because of a deep-seated presupposition about what it is to have a thought involving a concept, a presupposition that is widely held, but not defended. The presupposition is so much taken for granted that it can seem that that there is no daylight between a theory of concept identity and a theory of content – that given a concept's identity conditions, a theory of what it is to have a thought involving the concept follows immediately. Suppose we begin with a concept's identity conditions. What is it, then, to have a concept? A very natural way to answer this question is to convert the concept's identity conditions into a condition on a thinker by a straightforward or perspicuous mapping. So if concepts are individuated by their reference, the obvious condition is that a thinker

apply the concept to its reference. And if concepts are individuated by their canonical connections with other concepts, the obvious condition is that a thinker make the inferences that correspond to those connections. Call this condition a concept's *associated condition*.

At this point, it may seem that we already have arrived at a theory of content. In particular, on the hypothesis that concepts are individuated by their reference, we have arrived at an informational theory of content. And on the hypothesis that concepts are individuated by their canonical connections with other concepts, we have arrived at an inferential-role theory of content.

So, by an apparently very natural line of thought, we have moved from a theory of a concept's identity conditions to a theory of content that is committed to the Extreme Position.

The last step, however – the one that took us from a concept's associated condition to a theory of content – is a substantive step. In particular, the move presupposes what I will call *the disposition view* (short for *the identity-disposition-straightforward-mapping view*):

The disposition view: for a thinker to have a concept is for a thinker to have a disposition to satisfy the concept's associated condition.

The disposition view is not merely the view that dispositions are among the determinants of content, or even that they are the most important or only determinants of content. It is the view that your dispositions determine what concept figures in the content of your thought in a particular way – what I have been calling a straightforward way. The point of the technical term “associated conditions” is to make more precise

what this straightforward way is (and to do so while remaining neutral about the nature of concepts' identity conditions). In rough, intuitive terms, the disposition view is the view that having a concept is having a disposition "to get the concept's identity conditions right."

If it is not obvious that the disposition view is a substantive assumption, notice that the *responsibility view* (short for the *identity-responsibility-straightforward mapping view*), which I mentioned above, is an alternative to the disposition view:

The responsibility view: for a thinker to have a concept is for the thinker to be subject to (or responsible to) a standard – that given by the concept's associated condition.

Both views rely on a straightforward mapping to derive the concept's associated condition from a concept's identity. The responsibility view illustrates that, even given that first step, the disposition view is not mandatory.³¹ There is a further question of the thinker's relation to the concept's associated condition. The disposition view holds that having a particular concept is a matter of being disposed to satisfy the condition; the responsibility view holds that having the concept is a matter of being subject to, or responsible to, the condition.

I will have more to say about the responsibility view later. I mention it now simply in order to make clear that there are alternatives to the disposition view. Even after we have granted the idea of converting a concept, by a straightforward mapping,

³¹ The first step itself is not mandatory. To take one example, a theory of content could hold that a thinker's dispositions are determinants of content, but that the mapping from the dispositions to the content that they determine is not straightforward. There are indefinitely many mappings from dispositions (and other determinants of content) to concepts, and it is a substantive claim that dispositions determine content by a straightforward or perspicuous mapping.

into a condition that a thinker could satisfy, the move to a specific theory of content – say an informational or an inferential-role theory of content – depends on presupposing the disposition view.

The disposition view is the source of two related features of leading theories of content. First, it explains why leading theories of content have difficulty accounting for incomplete understanding. Second, it is the reason that they are plagued by what I called above “the problem of error.”

As to the first point, the disposition view motivates the Extreme Position (though, as I said above, it does not entail it). The disposition view holds that what it is to have a concept is to have a disposition to satisfy the concept’s associated condition. Since the notion of a concept’s associated condition has been explained in terms of the vague notion of a straightforward mapping, there is some imprecision in what counts as a disposition to satisfy a concept’s associated condition. But at least in typical or central cases, such a disposition – a disposition to satisfy a condition that straightforwardly or perspicuously corresponds to the concept’s identity conditions – is likely to constitute mastery of a concept. So theories of content that presuppose the disposition view are likely to be committed to the Extreme Position.

Turning to the second point, the problem of error, in one form or another, has dominated recent work on the content question, from Kripke’s (1982) book and the literature it engendered to discussions of “the disjunction problem.”³² It is only a slight

³² *E.g.*, Dretske 1981; Fodor, 1987, pp. 99-127; Fodor 1990.

oversimplification to say that most recent attempts to answer the content question consist in trying to show that a specific disposition-based proposal can allow for error.³³

It is easy to see that the problem of error is a problem specifically for disposition-view based theories of content. The disposition view holds that having a concept is a matter of having the disposition to satisfy the concept's associated condition. It thus encounters difficulty in explaining how a thinker who has a given concept can make certain kinds of systematic errors. As the large literature on the subject illustrates, however, disposition-based views have considerable room for maneuver. I mentioned above some of the strategies, such as appeals to ideal conditions, that theorists of content have used to address the problem of error. The point for present purposes is that, although the problem of error presents a serious difficulty for leading theories of content, there is a prospect of solving the problem because mastery of a concept is in principle consistent with systematic error. In contrast, if thinkers can have thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts, the problem for leading theories of content is more serious.

7. The instability of leading theories

7.1 Disposition-based theories of content and deference

Let me summarize the state of the art with respect to incomplete understanding.

Philosophers who work on the content of thought often seem to presuppose the Extreme

³³ Fodor (1990, p. 128) is explicit: "I've tacitly assumed throughout this paper that if you can get a theory of content that squares the intuition that 'X' means X only if 'X' tokens carry information about X-instantiation with the intuition that 'X' means X only if you can have X-tokens that aren't caused by Xs, then you've done all that a solution to Brentano's problem is required to do."

Position in much of their theorizing. In light of the influential arguments of Burge (1979, 1986a, 1986b; 1990) and others, however, many philosophers would accept, at least on reflection, that having attitudes involving a concept does not require mastery of the concept. Such philosophers tend to assume that all incompletely grasped contents are made possible by the thinker's deferring to others who fully grasp the concept. (Indeed, this is widely taken to be the main lesson of some of Burge's most influential work.) Moreover, this assumption is thought to take care of the phenomenon of incomplete understanding without a significant impact on the main theory of content: theorists give a theory that implicitly or explicitly requires full grasp, and then if they consider incompletely understood contents at all, they assume that they can be accounted for merely by adding a proviso about deference to the primary theory of content.

Some theorists have, commendably, been explicit about this. As we have already seen,³⁴ Peacocke is a good example. He develops a sophisticated theory of content that is based on conditions for fully grasping concepts. Almost as an afterthought, and explicitly in response to Burge, Peacocke acknowledges that thinkers can, by means of deference to others, have thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts (pp. 27-33). As discussed further below (section 7.3), after registering the qualification about deference, he goes on to ignore incomplete understanding and to assume concept mastery in using his theory to do explanatory work.

The assumption that incomplete understanding can be accounted for by an appeal to deference implies a fundamental difference in the way in which the data of ordinary attributions of content are to be treated in deference and non-deference cases. In

³⁴ See above notes 25-26 and accompanying text.

deference cases, thinkers are credited with thoughts involving the relevant concepts. In non-deference cases, the thinkers are disqualified from having thoughts involving the relevant concepts. (Peacocke (1992, p. 29), for example, says deference “is essential.”)³⁵ Thus, from the point of view of the content of thought, deference cases are classified with cases in which the thinker has mastery of the relevant concepts, while non-deference cases are sharply distinguished from those two categories of cases. Can this strikingly different treatment of deference and non-deference cases be justified either by the data itself or by theoretical considerations?

The point of the examples of incomplete understanding that I discussed above is that no special status for deference seems to be found in the data of ordinary attributions of content. Ordinary practices of attributing contents do not set non-deference cases apart or identify them as somehow second-rate or special. Thus, the different treatment of deference and non-deference cases cannot be justified on the basis of the data. That much I am taking as a premise in this paper.

Let us turn to the question of whether leading, disposition-based theories of content have good theoretical grounds for holding that, from the point of view of the content of thought, our ordinary attributions of content in deference cases are like cases of full understanding, while our ordinary attributions of content in non-deference cases must be reinterpreted or dismissed as mistakes. What would an adequate theoretical

³⁵ It is possible to interpret Peacocke’s remark to mean that deference is essential only *to this way* of having a concept one incompletely grasps, thus leaving open the possibility that there could be other ways. But Peacocke makes no mention of any such possibility, and his discussion gives the strong impression that he takes deference to be the only way a thinker who lacks mastery of a concept could have a thought involving the concept (1992, pp. 27-33).

motivation be? To the extent that an otherwise successful theory implies that a thinker cannot have a concept that she incompletely grasps without deference to others, that would be a reason for discounting the data of non-deference cases. The more otherwise successful the theory – relative to the alternative candidate theories that do not exclude the possibility of independent incomplete understanding – the stronger the reason for discounting non-deference cases.

So let us ask whether leading theories of content are (otherwise) successful theories that allows for deference cases but rule out non-deference cases.

First, they certainly rule out non-deference cases. We saw in section 4 that although sophisticated inferential-role and informational theories attempt to allow for error, they do not avoid the need for the thinker to have mastery of the concepts that figure in her thoughts (aside from deference cases).

Second, are they “otherwise successful? This is not the subject of the present paper, but it is worth remembering that leading theories of content – informational and inferential-role theories – are arguably not terribly successful even on their home ground of cases of full grasp. As mentioned above, they notoriously struggle with the problem of error. Moreover, as pointed out in section 4, the disposition view is the source of the problem of error. (If we did not assume that having a concept is having an disposition to satisfy the concept’s associated condition, there would be no general problem of explaining how thinkers could have a concept yet make systematic errors in using it.)

Third, the question I want to focus on is whether leading theories of content can adequately account for deference cases. Let us distinguish two possible options for a

disposition-view theorist who appeals to deference to account for cases of incomplete understanding.³⁶

First, she can argue that deference enables a thinker to come within the theorist's standard account of what it is to have a concept. That is, if the theorist holds that to have a concept is to exercise a disposition to satisfy the concept's associated condition, she can argue that deference enables a thinker to have and exercise that very disposition. Call this the *disposition-mechanism* account of the role of deference (because it takes deference to be a mechanism for acquiring or maintaining the appropriate disposition). The disposition account, if successful, would allow deference to be smoothly integrated into the theorist's standard account of what it is to have thought involving a given concept.³⁷

The theorist's second option is to argue that deference is simply a second, different way of having a thought involving a given concept. Call an account that takes this option a *second-way* account of the role of deference. A second-way theorist gives up the disposition view (since she can no longer hold that what it *is* to have a concept is to have a disposition to satisfy its associated condition). She still has the possibility, however, of offering a unified explanation of what it is for a thought to involve a

³⁶ See note 23 above.

³⁷ A modified version of the first option would hold that deference is a mechanism for some disposition that is different from the disposition that standardly constitutes having a concept, but is related to that disposition in an appropriate way. Such an account would have to show why having the different, deference-enabled disposition was a way of having a concept, given the account's main account of what it is to have a concept.

particular concept – if she can identify what it is that thinkers who have mastery of a concept, on the one hand, and thinkers who lack mastery of a concept but defer to others, on the other, have in common in virtue of which their thoughts involve the same concept. I will begin with the first option, the disposition-mechanism account of the role of deference and show that it is not plausible that deference in general ensures that the deferring person has the appropriate dispositions necessary for him to come within a disposition-based theory's standard account of what it is to have a concept. We can then return to the second option, a second-way account of deference.

In order for a theorist to show that deference can be integrated into the disposition-based theory of content, a theorist must show that deference is sufficient to enable a person who lacks mastery of a concept to come within the theory's standard explanation of how a person's attitude involves that concept. That is, deference has to reliably ensure that a person who incompletely grasps a concept nevertheless comes to have a disposition to satisfy the concept's associated standard. The question is not whether deference might sometimes enable the deferring thinker to have the appropriate dispositions. That a thinker defers to experts with respect to a concept (and satisfies some other minimal conditions) is supposed to be sufficient for the thinker to have thoughts involving the concept. Thus, if deference is to be integrated into a disposition-based theory of content, deference must in general guarantee that the deferring thinker acquires the appropriate dispositions.

There is no standard view about exactly what deference is, but we can say roughly what is involved. Deference is generally taken to be mediated linguistically. A certain speaker or speakers use a word to express a concept that they fully grasp. Another

thinker, who does not fully grasp the concept, also uses the word. (It is also plausible that that the thinker must have some minimal understanding of the word – for example, know what grammatical category it belongs to – and some minimal knowledge of what kind of thing it refers to.³⁸ I will usually omit this point in what follows, as it will not affect the argument.)

In addition to this background, there is a further crucial element, for which we can specifically use the term *deference*. There are a range of candidates for this element. At one extreme, it could be sufficient merely that a thinker belongs to a community and does not explicitly and tenaciously insist on a deviant usage in the face of clear evidence that the experts do otherwise. Second, deference could be constituted by an *intention* to use a word to mean whatever someone else (an expert) uses the word to mean. (A different possibility would be an intention to correct one's use of the word if it is discovered to diverge from that of the expert.) Third, at the other extreme, deference could be constituted by roughly the following pattern of behavior: if the thinker notices that her use of the word diverges from that of the other speakers, she tends to revise her own use to conform to theirs. Call this a *revision tendency*.

There are two opposing constraints on a disposition-mechanism account. On the one hand, if deference is to account for the wide range of cases that it is generally held to account for, the condition that a thinker must satisfy to count as deferring to an expert cannot be made too strong. The more that deference is taken to involve, the less plausible it will be that the thinkers with incomplete understanding do defer to thinkers with full grasp of the relevant concept. This constraint rules out anything stronger than the third

³⁸ See Peacocke 1992, p. 29.

version of deference – that the thinker tends to revise her usage if she notices that her usage diverges from that of others (including if it pointed out to her). In typical presentations of Burge-style examples of supposedly deference-dependence attitudes, all that is assumed is membership in a community and lack of an intention to depart from its conventions. Certainly, no more is assumed than that the thinker with incomplete grasp of the relevant concept would tend to revise her behavior if corrected or if she notices a divergence. Yet those assumptions are sufficient to license content attributions involving incompletely grasped concepts. Thus, our ordinary practices do not require more than a revision tendency.

Moreover, aside from what is assumed in presentations of examples, in many of the actual cases that deference-dependence is supposed to account for, it is not plausible that the thinker in fact has more than such a tendency. If thinkers who incompletely grasp common concepts – examples might include MODEM, MEGABYTE, DIGITAL, BARITONE HORN, DIABETES, VIRUS, FIRST DERIVATIVE, MINOR CHORD, and SURVEYOR are able to have thoughts involving the concepts by virtue of deference to others, deference must not involve *more* than a revision tendency. We certainly cannot assume, for example, that a thinker does not count as deferring to an expert unless the thinker acquires the relevant dispositions of the expert.

On the other hand, the second, opposing constraint is that if deference is to be a mechanism that enables the thinker to have the appropriate disposition, the condition that a thinker must satisfy to count as deferring to an expert must be strong enough that a thinker who satisfies it will reliably acquire the appropriate disposition. The first and second candidates for deference are plainly too weak to satisfy this constraint. A person

could, for example, intend to use a word to mean whatever others mean by it, yet not change her dispositions to apply the word to accord with theirs. Thus, in order to grant the strongest possible case to the disposition-mechanism account of deference, I will take deference to be a revision tendency. If, as I will argue, even a revision tendency does not ensure that the deferring thinker has the appropriate dispositions, the other, weaker candidates for deference certainly do not do so. (As I suggested above, I think that, in fact, we may not be entitled to assume more than that the thinker belongs to the community and does not tenaciously insist on a deviant usage. If that is right, the case against the disposition-mechanism account is even stronger than the following argument makes it out to be.)

Let us turn to the prospects for fitting deference within an disposition-based theory's standard account of what it is to have a concept. Current theories of content typically make no attempt to show that their conditions for content would reliably be satisfied by means of deference. How deference could ensure that a person acquires the relevant dispositions of the person to whom she defers is not straightforward. On the face of it, a person who defers to another in the use of a word does not thereby simply acquire the appropriate dispositions of the latter person.

I will begin by focusing on an informational rather than an inferential-role theory because informational theories *prima facie* have better prospects for integrating deference into their accounts of content. (I consider Peacocke's inferential-role theory in section 7.3.) It is much more plausible that an expert could help you to make the right connections between a mental representation and the world than the right connections between your mental states. You and the expert can observe your use of a word in

relation to the world. Informational theories care only that the thinker's mental representation covaries with the appropriate worldly property. Such theories abstract away from the mental processes that mediate the covariation. In contrast, inferential-role theories require that the thinker be disposed to make the right transitions between mental states. Let me sketch the basic point with respect to a simple informational theory of content.

Suppose that you use the word "jazz" to express the concept JAZZ and that you have a mental representation, M, that covaries with instances of jazz. I am not able reliably to recognize jazz, but I defer to you in my use of the word. The fact that I would alter my behavior if I noticed that my use of the word diverged from yours, or if you corrected me, is not sufficient to ensure that I acquire your disposition to token a mental representation in a way that covaries with instances of jazz. On the face of it, there are many gaps between my deference-enhanced dispositions and your disposition to token M in a way that covaries with jazz. Just to take a few examples, you may not be present on a given occasion, or you may not form a judgment on the issue in question. Even if you are present and form a judgment on the issue, I may not realize that you have done so. And so on. In light of these difficulties, my deferring to you could, at best, make it the case that I have a disposition to token a mental representation in a way that covaries with jazz under some complicated set of conditions.

Of course, I do not have to be perfect in my performance to have the relevant disposition. But if the notion of a disposition is not to become vacuous, there must be a principled distinction between a case in which a person has a disposition but it is not manifested and a case in which a person lacks the relevant disposition. That is the point

of appealing to notions such as interfering factors and ideal conditions. I will not offer a general account of dispositions, but we have been given no reason to think that all of the factors that may prevent my mental representation from covarying with instances of jazz – such as your not being present, your deciding not to correct me, my not understanding that you have tried to correct me, and so on – are interfering factors or ways in which conditions are less than ideal. To the contrary, the conditions that have to be in place for my mental representation to covary with instances of jazz look suspiciously like the condition that everything has to go the way it has to go in order for my mental representation to covary with instances of jazz. So it does not seem that a non-vacuous appeal to ideal conditions will solve the problem.

A related, general problem is that I can observe only your utterances of the word “jazz,” but you will frequently token M without uttering the word and may utter the word without tokening M. (Remember that we are granting to the informational theorist a notion of tokening a mental representation according to which not every occurrence of the mental representation is a tokening). Similarly, you can only correct my utterances of the word “jazz,” but I may mistakenly token my mental representation without uttering the word.

A further problem is that when conditions are ideal for me, conditions may not be ideal for you – for example, you may be tired or distracted or have something in your eye. Thus, you may make mistakes, despite your mastery of the concept. My deferring to your performance will then result in my making mistakes, despite the fact that conditions are ideal for me.

The foregoing considerations make a strong case that an appeal to ideal conditions or to a *ceteris paribus* clause will not make it possible for a disposition-view-based theory to integrate deference. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that a disposition-based theory could be formulated in such a way that deference-dependent contents would fit smoothly within the theory's account of content. Such a theory would have to be based on a dispositional condition that is common to thinkers who fully grasp a concept and thinkers who do not, but defer to others who do. Of course, the theory would have to be otherwise plausible as well. Whether such a theory can be found is difficult to answer in the abstract. I will therefore turn to Fodor's and Peacocke's theories of content and examine their prospects for explaining the role of deference.

7.2 Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory and deference

Let us begin with Fodor's asymmetric dependence theory. Fodor's starting point, which we can grant for purposes of the argument, is that for a thinker to have a given concept is for the thinker to have a mental symbol that expresses the concept. As we saw in section 4, Fodor replaces the basic idea of informational theories that a mental symbol covaries with its reference with the idea that a mental symbol is governed by laws (nomic relations) that exhibit a certain pattern of metaphysical dependencies. We stipulated that a nomic relation *L* between a property and the (property of causing) the tokening of a mental symbol *S* is *primary* just in case all other nomic relations between properties and the tokening of *S* asymmetrically depend on *L* (*i.e.*, they depend on *L*, but *L* does not depend on any of them).

In these terms, we saw that Fodor's strategy for solving the problem of error is to hold that the reference of a mental symbol is the property that figures in its primary law.

Other properties may be nomically related to the tokening of the mental symbol, but the symbol does not refer to those properties because the laws in which those properties figure are not primary.

As we did in section 4, we should grant for purposes of argument that theory can account for cases of concept mastery. In particular, let us assume that in cases of concept mastery, or at least in typical ones, there will be the appropriate patterns of laws.³⁹

Now these patterns of laws are not generated magically. They have mechanisms, crucially, the thinker's dispositions. When he tries to show that the right patterns will be generated, Fodor takes the relevant mechanisms to be the thinker's intentions with respect to the use of a word (1990, 115-116) or "the mechanisms that underlie [those] intentions" or "linguistic dispositions" more generally (1991, p. 276-277) and the corresponding dispositions in the case of concepts.⁴⁰ In order to get the appropriate asymmetric dependence, the thinker has to have the right intentions or dispositions. For example, our "intention to use 'water' only of stuff of the same kind as the local samples has the effect of making its applications to XYZ asymmetrically dependent on its applications to H₂O *ceteris paribus* (1990, p. 115)."

In the case of *mental* content, which is Fodor's real concern, the relevant mechanisms are not the thinker's intentions (since we do not have intentions with respect

³⁹ As noted in footnote 29 above, Fodor officially attempts to provide only *sufficient* conditions for content. As explained there, however, for our purposes it is appropriate to set aside this limited official aspiration and to consider whether Fodor's theory can account for actual cases.

⁴⁰ Fodor 1990, esp. pp. 98-100; 1991, pp. 277, 313-14 fn. 8; 1988, p. 10, quoted in Boghossian, 1991, pp. 81-82. See also the next footnote.

to our mental representations), but the thinker's dispositions.⁴¹ In my terms, it is the thinker's tacit appreciation of the concept's connection to its reference that is supposed to ensure the obtaining of the relevant patterns of laws. In sum, what we are granting Fodor, because it what would allow his theory to account for the content of thought in cases of concept mastery, is that dispositions that constitute tacit appreciation of the connection between a concept and a property P generate a law connecting the appropriate mental representation to P and ensure that that law will be primary.

⁴¹ For ease of expression, Fodor often talks in terms of linguistic expressions rather than mental representations. But he intends his arguments to apply primarily to mental content. See, e.g. Fodor 1990, pp. 96-99; Fodor 1991, pp. 288-289. Thus, for example, Fodor makes the point about mechanisms explicitly with respect to linguistic content and indicates that the same points apply *mutatis mutandis* for mental content (Fodor 1990, pp.115-116, also pp. 98-100; Fodor 1991, p. 276). "It's built into the way that one tells the Twin Earth story that it's about kind-terms (*mutatis mutandis*, *kind-concepts*). In particular, it's part of the story about 'water' being a kind-term that English speakers intended it to apply to all and only stuff of the same (natural) kind as paradigmatic local samples A fortiori, it's part of 'water' . . . being [a] kind-term[] that speakers intend *not* to apply [it] to anything that is distinguishably *not* of the same kind as their local samples." 1990, p. 115 (emphasis supplied). Fodor goes on to explain that such intentions are the mechanisms that generate the appropriate asymmetric dependencies (pp. 115-116). The corresponding account for mental content ("mutatis mutandis") requires appropriate substitutes for our intentions with respect to the use of our terms since we have no intentions with respect to mental representations. Dispositions to token concepts are the appropriate substitutes. For reasons not relevant to the present paper, I think that it is not legitimate for Fodor to appeal to intentions even in the case of linguistic content (see Greenberg 2000). But the point for present purposes is that on Fodor's view, it is certain dispositions – our mastery of our concepts, in my terms – that are supposed to generate or underlie the crucial patterns of laws.

With this background, we can examine whether deference cases can be integrated smoothly into Fodor's theory of content. Fodor makes clear that he offers a disposition-mechanism account of deference, rather than a second-way account (1994, pp. 33-39; see also 1991, pp. 285-286). Deference is simply one mechanism that can effect the appropriate patterns of laws. As he puts it (1994, p. 35): "From the point of view of an informational semantics, the situation is *absolutely normal*: that my *elm* and *acid* thoughts have the content that they do depends on their being mechanisms that reliably correlate them with instantiations of elmhood and acidhood respectively." "What philosophers call 'linguistic deference' is actually *the use of experts as instruments*" (1994, p. 36).⁴²

Let us ask whether deference would ensure that a thinker with incomplete understanding would have the same pattern of nomic dependencies as a thinker with full understanding – *i.e.*, that the reference law would be primary.

Questions about what patterns of nomic relations obtain or would obtain under various circumstances are extraordinarily difficult to evaluate. On the face of it, however, it is not at all clear that deference would have the necessary effect.

First, given our assumptions, the fact that a thinker would revise his use when he notices divergence between himself and the expert would seem at best to generate a new nomic relation between the (tokenings of the) relevant mental representation of the

⁴² In response to Brian Loar (1991), Fodor helpfully distinguishes deference's role in determining what concepts our words express from its role in determining the content of thought. The reference of words is "parasitic on the reference of the concepts they are conventionally used to express" and deference may be "one of the conventions that determines which words express which concepts" (1991, 285-286). In contrast, he suggests, deference plays no constitutive role in determining the content of thought; what matters is only "how your head is connected to the world" (1991, pp. 286-290).

deferential thinker and the expert's corrections (for convenience, we can use *the expert's corrections* as a technical term for those tokenings of the expert's mental representation of which the deferring thinker becomes aware). For a mental representation to track the expert's corrections is not the same as for the mental representation to track the property that figures in the primary law governing the expert's mental representation. For one thing, the expert may make systematic mistakes when correcting the deferential thinker. According to Fodor's theory, those mistakes do not affect the content of the *expert's* mental representation because they are covered by laws that asymmetrically depend on the expert's primary law. But the deferential thinker will have no way of distinguishing those of the expert's corrections that are governed by the primary law from those that are governed by laws that depend on the primary law. So there is no reason to think that deference will generate *any* nomic relation between the deferential thinker's mental representation and the concept's reference.

Moreover, even if we assumed that deference would generate such a nomic relation, it would not be primary. Roughly speaking, on Fodor's account, in order to evaluate whether law B depends on law A, we ask whether the minimal change that would eliminate the law A would eliminate law B (Fodor, 1990, pp. 113, 115-116; 1991, pp. 276-277). The relevant kind of dependence is not historical or across time – “diachronous” – but “synchronous” (1990, p. 134 fn. 18; 1987, p. 109).⁴³ In other words, the question is not whether the existence (or elimination) of one law would, over time, lead to the existence (or elimination) of another, but whether, at a particular point in time, one law ontologically depends on another.

⁴³ See also Loewer and Rey (1991, p. xxxvi fn. 51); I discuss this issue in Greenberg 2000.

As we have characterized the deferring thinker, he does not wait to use the concept until the expert is around or the expert has used the concept; he uses it based on his own understanding, but accepts corrections from the expert when they are offered. Indeed, the deferential thinker may well be confident that all or most of his uses of the concept are correct. Thus, even when he considers it important to apply the concept correctly, he may not consult an expert. Since the deferring thinker does not correctly understand the relation between the concept and its reference, there will be a nomic relation (or nomic relations) connecting some property (or properties) other than the concept's reference to the relevant mental symbol. The question is whether that nomic relation asymmetrically depends on the reference law (*i.e.*, the nomic relation between the concept's reference and the mental symbol that we are granting for the sake of argument).

It is clear that it does not. The reference law can be eliminated in a number of ways without synchronically affecting the other nomic relation. For example, if the deferring thinker's ability to recognize the expert was lost, perhaps because the expert's appearance changed, the reference law would no longer obtain. But the loss of the deferring thinker's ability to recognize the expert would leave his non-deferential tokenings of his mental representation unchanged. Similarly, if the expert lost his mastery of the concept, the reference law would be eliminated with no synchronic effect on the error law. The underlying reason that the other laws do not depend on the reference law is that deference to the expert is no part of the mechanism that sustains the deferring thinker's ordinary tokenings of his mental representation. There is a sense in which the mistaken uses of the concept depend on the expert – namely, that the thinker

would change those uses if corrected by the expert. But this kind of dependence has nothing to do with the nomic dependence around which Fodor's theory is built.

In sum, there is no reason to think that deference would establish the appropriate reference law for the deferring thinker's mental symbol, and, even if it did, that law would not be primary. Although Fodor suggests in general terms that deference is such a mechanism, he makes no attempt to show that it would produce the appropriate patterns of laws, and we have seen that it is not plausible that it would do so.

7.3 Peacocke's possession-condition theory and deference

Let us turn to Peacocke's theory, our model of an inferential-role theory. As we saw in section 4, Peacocke bases his theory of content on a theory of concepts and concept mastery. Peacocke holds that certain patterns of inference, or belief-forming practices more generally, are distinctive of each concept (1992, pp. 5-6). In particular, Peacocke maintains that each concept is individuated by the condition for fully grasping or mastering it, which he calls a "possession condition". The possession condition specifies the concept's canonical transitions.

First, a possession condition does not require that a thinker actually be disposed to make the canonical transitions. Rather, it specifies that the thinker must find those transitions "primitively compelling." A transition is *primitively* compelling if and only if the thinker finds it compelling and does not find it compelling because of an inference from other premises or principles (p. 6).⁴⁴ (The notion of primitive compulsion can be

⁴⁴ There is another component to Peacocke's definition of "primitively compelling" (1992, p. 6; see also p. 135), which is not relevant here. For discussion, see Greenberg 2000.

seen as an attempt to develop and make more precise Wittgenstein's notion of finding certain steps or ways of going on "natural" (p. 13).)

Second, a possession condition requires not only that a thinker find instances of a canonical transition compelling, but that the thinker does so *because* the instances are instances of the relevant type of transition.⁴⁵ As Peacocke elaborates (1992, pp. 135-138; 143-145; 189, 195, 197) the thinker's finding the appropriate transitions compelling must be *causally explained* by the feature of the transitions that makes them instances of the relevant type of transition.

This much is Peacocke's theory of concepts and concept mastery. Peacocke's theory of content is tightly linked to his theory of concepts. According to Peacocke what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept is 1) that the thinker is primitively compelled to make mental transitions of the type specified by the concept's possession condition and 2) that the causal explanation of the thinker's finding these

⁴⁵ E.g., 1992, pp. 6-7, 137-138; 163-164. Peacocke often expresses the point by saying that the thinker must find the transitions compelling because of their *form*. The form of a transition is that feature of instances of the transition that make them instances of that transition. I prefer the term *type* rather than *form* because Peacocke's notion of the form of the transition is not a notion of logical or syntactic form. The form of a typical transition will be defined in terms of conceptual contents (e.g., 1992, pp. 6-7, 26, 136-145). Thus, when I say that form is not logical or syntactic, I mean that what makes it the case that an instance is an instance of a particular form may depend on the content of the instance, not just on its logical structure or syntactic properties. The use of the term "form" is less apt in some cases than in others, and in some possession conditions Peacocke spells out the causal explanation requirement in ways that do not make use of the term. For example, Peacocke's possession condition for the concept RED requires that the thinker "be disposed to form the belief [roughly that that object is red] *for the reason that* the object is so presented" (p. 7, emphasis added).

inferences primitively compelling is the one specified in the concept's possession condition (pp. 107-111, 134-145, 177-197).

In brief, on Peacocke's theory of content, having a concept is having the disposition specified by the concept's possession condition – the causal basis of the thinker's finding the specified inferences compelling. What makes it the case that a thought involves the concept is that it is *that* disposition, rather than some other one, that explains the thinker's finding the relevant transitions compelling. Thus, Peacocke's account of a thought's involving a particular concept depends on the assumption that the thinker satisfies the concept's possession condition.

Peacocke officially recognizes, however, that possession conditions for concepts are not conditions for attribution of attitudes involving the concepts (pp. 27-30). He accepts that Burge has shown that thinkers with incomplete understanding of a concept can still be correctly attributed attitudes involving that concept. For this reason, Peacockean possession conditions, which state "what is required for full mastery of a particular concept" are different from "attribution conditions," which state conditions that are sufficient for correctly attributing a thinker a thought involving a concept (p. 29).⁴⁶ The attribution conditions, as we will see, centrally involve deference to another thinker's use of a word.

As noted in section 4, Peacocke does not integrate the phenomenon of thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts into his theory of content. After pointing out

⁴⁶ See also p. 249, fn. 7. Rather than simply saying that attribution conditions for RED are the conditions under which someone has a belief involving that concept, Peacocke says that they are conditions for "an attribution of an attitude with a content containing the concept *red*" to be true. This formulation and a few other hints suggest some ambivalence on Peacocke's part. For discussion, see Greenberg 2000.

that thinkers can have thoughts involving incompletely grasped contents and claiming that deference (plus the other minimal attribution conditions) is sufficient for them to do so, he ignores the issue and often relies on the assumption that thinkers have mastery of the concepts that figure in the contents of their thoughts.

For example, Peacocke's solution to Kripke's rule-following problem depends on the assumption that thinkers have mastery of their concepts and does not address the issue of thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts (pp. 133-145; 190-197). And Peacocke's discussion of how the possession conditions of component concepts combine to determine what is required for a state to be a belief with a given content does not mention incomplete understanding and takes mastery of the component concepts for granted (pp. 106-115). Peacocke states, for instance, that the requirements derived by "multiplying out" the clauses of the possession conditions "state the (often counterfactual) relations in which a belief state must stand if it is to be the relevant belief" (p. 111). But only a thinker who fully grasps the constituent concepts will meet these requirements. Similarly, Peacocke's treatments of Davidsonian radical interpretation and of Evans's "generality constraint" rely crucially on the assumption that thinker who have attitudes involving a concept satisfy its possession condition (pp. 37-38, 41-45, 57).

Let us consider Peacocke's reliance on deference to account for incomplete understanding. He does not attempt to give a theoretical account of the basis of "attribution conditions." Instead, Peacocke proposes three conditions that he asserts are "jointly sufficient" for a thinker to have a thought involving a particular concept, the concept *red*, for example (p. 29):

- a. The subject is willing sincerely to assert some sentence of the form "___ red ___" containing the word "red" (or some translation of it).

b. He has some minimal knowledge of the kind of reference it has (*e.g.*, that it is a color word).

c. He defers in his use of the word to members of his linguistic community.

As Peacocke emphasizes, these conditions are much weaker than a possession condition; a thinker who does not satisfy a concept's possession condition can satisfy the three conditions.

Peacocke has little more to say about the nature of attribution conditions and their relation to possession conditions. For example, he does not address the issue whether there are other sufficient conditions for a thinker who does not have mastery of a concept to have a thought involving it. And he does not attempt to explain *why* the three attribution conditions are sufficient for having a thought involving a concept, given Peacocke's main account of the content of thought.

It seems clear that Peacocke is offering a second-way account of the role of deference, rather than a disposition-mechanism account. That is, he does not think that the deferring thinker will come within the main account of the content of thought. In order to come within that account, the thinker must satisfy the concept's possession condition. But if the thinker satisfied the concept's possession condition, there would be no need for separate attribution conditions for thinkers with incomplete understanding. Thus, Peacocke intends attribution conditions to be an additional, different way of having a thought involving the concept. Nevertheless, let us briefly examine why deference to an expert's use of the concept-word (plus knowing a little about the kind of reference that the word has) does not guarantee that the thinker comes within Peacocke's account of the content of thought.

As we have seen, that account has, in effect, two elements. A person's thought involves a particular concept in virtue of 1) her finding certain inferences (involving that concept) primitively compelling and 2) that her finding them primitively compelling has a certain explanation. It is easy to see that a person who lacks full grasp of a concept and defers to an expert in the use of the concept-word (and knows a little about the kind of reference the word has⁴⁷) will not, *ipso facto*, satisfy either of these elements. (As we have done so far in order to give the best possible case to the disposition-mechanism account, we can take deference to others to be constituted by a tendency to revise usage if a divergence is noticed.)

First, one who defers to an expert does not thereby come to find primitively compelling the inferences that the expert finds primitively compelling. In fact, to the extent that one makes or is disposed to make an inference only because one learns that another thinker is disposed to make that inference, it is arguably definitional that one does not find the inference *primitively* compelling.

Second, even if we set aside the question of primitive compulsion and simply focus on the inferences that the thinker makes or is disposed to make because of deference to the expert, the thinker's making those inferences will have the wrong explanation. The explanation will be the expert's correction of the thinker, not the inference's having the right form. We cannot even assume that the expert's correction of the thinker will have the right explanation; what is guaranteed to have the right explanation is only the expert's finding certain inferences primitively compelling. The

⁴⁷ I will omit this qualification for brevity.

expert's actual corrections of the thinker may not only fail to have the right explanation, they may even be mistaken.

In sum, Peacocke's possession-condition-based theory of content does not explain why a thinker who does not satisfy a concept's possession condition but defers to others who do satisfy the condition is thereby able to have thoughts involving the concept. In other words, a disposition-mechanism account of the role of deference is not viable for Peacocke's theory of content. (As noted above, Peacocke does not claim differently; he should be understood to offer a second-way, rather than a disposition-mechanism account.) Peacocke's main theory of content seems at first to be a disposition-view-based theory: as we have seen, it holds that what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept is, very roughly, that it is mastery of *that* concept rather than some other concept that the thinker has exercised. But once Peacocke acknowledges that a thinker can have thoughts involving the concept without having mastery of the concept, he has abandoned the disposition view – that what it *is* to have a concept is to have a disposition to satisfy that concept's associated condition.

Suppose it were suggested, on behalf of Peacocke, that it is the expert's finding certain judgments compelling and the explanation of her doing so that determines the content of the deferential thinker's thought. Such a technical device would not help to make sense of the role of deference within Peacocke's possession-condition-based theory of content. It would leave us with two different ways of having a thought involving a particular concept: one's inferential dispositions could have the right explanation or one could defer in one's use of a word to an expert whose inferential dispositions have the right explanation. We would still lack an account of what a thought's involving a

particular concept is such that these are two ways of accomplishing it. And we would still be unable to preserve the disposition view.

In sum, Peacocke given us two different sets of sufficient conditions for a thought's involving a particular concept. A thinker can have and exercise the disposition that corresponds to satisfying the concept's possession condition. Or a thinker can know a little about the kind of thing that the concept word refers to and defer in his use of the word. Peacocke does not suggest that the two conditions correspond to two ways of having some more fundamental property in virtue of which a thinker has a thought involving a particular concept.

7.4 Deference as a second way of having a concept

We have seen that deference is not a way of acquiring the very disposition that, according to an disposition-based theory constitutes having a concept, but, at best, a way of acquiring some related, but very different, disposition. If a thinker can, by means of deference, have a thought involving a concept she incompletely grasps, then an disposition-based theory is wrong that what it is to have a concept *is* to have an disposition to satisfy the concept's associated standard. Thus, leading, disposition-based theories of content cannot smoothly integrate deference into their accounts of what it is to have a thought involving a given concept.

Let us therefore turn to the idea that deference is an additional, different way of having a concept. According to this proposal, a thinker's attitude involves a particular concept *either* in virtue of his exercising a certain disposition *or* in virtue of his deferring with respect to the use of the concept or the concept-word to another thinker who has the appropriate disposition.

A different possibility would be to replace a disposition-view of content with some new view of content that would explain what it is that thinkers with full grasp of a concept and thinkers who defer to others have in common in virtue of which their thoughts involve the same concept. (In the next section, I will point out that the responsibility view has the potential to offer such an explanation.) It is an open question on such a view whether deference would be the only, or even an important way, of having a thought involving an incompletely grasped concept. It is also an open question on such a view whether in cases of concept mastery, a thinker's mastery of the concept plays a role in making it the case that his thoughts involve that concept.

Leading theories of content have not offered a new unifying view of content, however. Instead, they offer a disposition-based theory and then appeal to deference to explain cases of incomplete understanding. We have already considered and rejected the proposal, well illustrated by Fodor's theory of content, that deference is a mechanism for effecting the appropriate dispositions. The proposal we are now considering abandons the attempt to unify deference cases and cases of full grasp; instead the proposal is simply to add a clause to try to capture the data of deference cases. Peacocke's theory is illustrative.

Adding such an apparently *ad hoc* clause for deference cases undermines the motivation for rejecting non-deference cases, however. There is no longer much force to the claim that the disposition view's simplicity and explanatory power militates against the genuineness of cases the theory cannot account for. If we can add a clause for deference cases, why not add other clauses?

The problem is even worse than this makes it seem. The disposition view is apparently a very natural view of what it is to have a concept. In practice, the reasons we have for believing leading theories of content depend heavily on the intuitive plausibility of the disposition view. I have space to touch on this point only briefly. Theorists of content assume that all they need to do to show that they have answered the content question is to produce an disposition-based theory of content and show that it can allow for the possibility of certain specific kinds of systematic error.⁴⁸ Showing that a theory solves the problem of allowing for error does not provide much in the way of independent support for the theory since that problem is, in general, a problem only for disposition-based theories. So it is the independent plausibility of the disposition view (or some specific version of it) that is doing the work.

Once we have added another clause to account for deference, however, we have given up the idea that what it is to have a concept is to have a disposition to satisfy the concept's associated condition. The new, two-part theory therefore cannot trade on the appeal of that idea. Once theorists add a clause for deference cases that is not motivated by the disposition view, we have little reason to believe the resulting theories, with their implication that a thinker cannot, without deference, have a thought involving an incompletely grasped content.

In sum, leading theories of content are unstable. These theories have accepted some cases of incomplete understanding and they have tried to stop there, with deference cases. But the underlying view that lends plausibility to the theories and that motivates

⁴⁸ See above notes 32-33 and accompanying text.

rejecting non-deference cases does not support the different treatment of deference and non-deference cases.

8. The responsibility view

I want to conclude by sketching, very briefly, the responsibility view's potential to explain the data of content attributions, including cases of concept mastery, deference cases, and non-deference cases. Developing a responsibility-based theory of content is a large project that I cannot even begin here.

The responsibility view holds that what it is for a thought to involve a particular concept is (at least in part)⁴⁹ for the thinker to be subject to standards that are distinctive of that concept. (To say that a person is subject to a standard is simply to say that it is correct for the person to do what the standard specifies.)

Thus, on the responsibility view, for a thinker to have a thought involving an incompletely grasped concept is for the thinker to be responsible to the concept's standards, without being disposed to satisfy those standards. Deference is one factor that can help to make a thinker responsible to the standards of a concept that she has not

⁴⁹ As noted above, a thinker's being subject to a standard might only be part of what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept. For example, one possibility is that our ordinary attributions of content play more than one role. Thus, even if one role is to indicate the conceptual standards to which thinkers are subject, another role might be to indicate thinkers' dispositions to satisfy those standards. The role of indicating the standards to which we hold thinkers responsible would presumably be more prominent in some contexts than in others. The idea that content attributions play two roles would fit the familiar observation that our use of propositional attitudes to give reason explanations has both normative and causal explanatory aspects. (Cf. Smith's (1994, pp. 92-98) suggestion that "reason" is ambiguous between normative and motivating reasons.)

mastered. This is *prima facie* a better account of deference cases than disposition-based theories can offer since deference is much more plausibly a mechanism that makes a person subject to a standard than it is a mechanism for acquiring the dispositions of the deferred-to person.

The responsibility view promises to make incomplete understanding without deference unmysterious. Deference is merely one mechanism that can help to make a thinker responsible to standards that she is not disposed to satisfy. But there may be diverse other mechanisms. In general, there are many different fact patterns or mechanisms, perhaps indefinitely many, that can make a person subject to a standard (or, better, play an important role in doing so). Candidates include deliberately undertaking to satisfy the standard (as in swearing an oath or making a promise), engaging in an activity, being a member of a community, being in a certain position or situation, having certain capacities or needs, or, perhaps, having a certain evolutionary history. In other words, in the terminology familiar from the functionalist critique of the identity theory of mind, the state of being subject to a standard is multiply realizable.

This observation may help us to locate the responsibility view with respect to other positions, thereby casting those positions in a new light. Consider, for example, Kripke's (1980) well-known observations about the role of historical chains of communication in determining the reference of names. Kripke pointed out that a name's reference may depend in part on a historical chain involving other people, reaching back to some initial baptism (1980, pp. 89-97). It is clear that on Kripke's picture, the thinker is not relying on other people to acquire a disposition. But Kripke does not offer a general view or even a picture of what kind of thing it is for a name to have a certain

reference that explains why it is that historical connections can help to make it the case that a name refers to a particular person. Although he recognizes that a historical chain leading back to a person is not sufficient and, in response to particular examples, makes suggestions about what else is needed (pp. 93-97), he does not have a general account that explains which historical connections to a person in which circumstances will yield reference to that person.

The responsibility view suggests a way of offering such an account that is consistent with Kripke's observations. On this account, the potential relevance of a historical chain is that it can be part of the explanation of why a thinker's use of a name is subject to a particular standard. The reason that a historical chain is not sufficient is that the mere existence of a historical chain linking a speaker's word to a particular person does not itself make a thinker subject to a corresponding standard. For example, the reason that a person's intention to use a name "with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it" seems to make a crucial difference (Kripke 1980, p. 96) is that such an intention could plausibly make a thinker subject to a standard. On the responsibility view, however, there is no reason to think that such an intention is the only kind of factor that could do so.

A very different kind of example is provided by theories according to which, for a thought to have a particular content is, roughly, for it to have a certain biological function (or for it to be produced by a mechanism with a certain function). On one version of such theories (Millikan 1984, 1990), having a certain kind of evolutionary history makes a

creature, or a system or state within a creature, responsible to certain standards.⁵⁰ Such a theory is a version of the responsibility view that takes a specific position on what makes thinkers responsible to the relevant standards. That evolutionary history is what makes thinkers responsible to conceptual standards is of course only one among many possible ways of developing a responsibility-based theory of content.

The responsibility view's explanation of incomplete understanding depends on the proposition that being disposed to satisfy a standard is not necessary in order to be subject to that standard. I cannot fully argue this claim here, though I think that, properly understood, it should not be controversial. Even allowing for the ways in which dispositions can come apart from actual performance, such as the interference of other factors, it is not plausible that we are disposed to do whatever it is correct for us to do.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Another possibility is to hold that a thought has its content in virtue of its biological function, but to deny that biological function is a normative notion. In other words, this view holds that having a biological function is a matter of having a certain kind of history, but denies that having such a history makes the thinker or the thought subject to standards or requirements. In contrast to the kind of theory described in the text, this view is not a version of the responsibility view.

⁵¹ In moral philosophy, it is often suggested that "ought implies can." I address objections based on this doctrine in Greenberg MSA. The most important point is that "ought implies can" is not plausible to the extent that the ability to satisfy a standard implies an understanding of what the standard requires. If a standard requires that a person do different things under different circumstances, a person who can do each of the different things that the standard requires can nevertheless be unable to satisfy the standard because she has an imperfect understanding of what is required when. For example, a person's weak moral reasoning abilities may make it impossible for him to meet certain moral requirements since it is not possible reliably to satisfy requirements without some way of working out what those requirements require in particular circumstances. But such defective moral understanding does not make it the case that the

Thus far, I have suggested, in effect, that the responsibility view has an advantage over the disposition view because, crudely put, it is less demanding of thinkers. It might seem that the responsibility view is vulnerable to an objection from the opposite direction. Is the responsibility view too liberal in granting contents to thinkers?

The responsibility view has a strong response. A person's dispositions and understanding are by no means irrelevant to the standards to which the person is subject. It seems plausible, at least in many contexts, that a person must have a disposition to satisfy a standard to some degree in order to be subject to the standard. Although a person who is not disposed to obey the rules of chess may nevertheless be subject to the rules of chess, it may be that a person who is disposed to move the pieces randomly is not subject to them. Why should this be? It seems plausible that the person's having some disposition "in the right direction" plays a role in determining which standard the person is subject to. On this picture, there are determinants of content other than the person's dispositions, but, at least in some circumstances, if the person lacks any disposition in the right direction, the other determinants may leave it underdetermined what the relevant standard is. For present purposes, the precise account does not matter. What is important is the plausibility of the idea that a person's having a disposition partially to satisfy a standard can help to make the person subject to the standard.

In sum, the responsibility view may have the potential to steer between two opposing pressures on theories of content. On the one hand, it avoids being too

relevant moral requirements do not apply (even if it excuses the person from blame). In sum, whatever plausibility the "ought implies can" doctrine has, it gives no reason to think that being subject to a standard implies appreciating what the standard requires in various circumstances (or being disposed to satisfy the standard, to the extent that that requires appreciating what the standard requires).

demanding on thinkers – it allows that thinkers can make systematic errors and, worse, can lack mastery of their concepts. On the other hand, it need not be too liberal in licensing attributions of content and can explain why thinker tends to need a disposition to satisfy the relevant conceptual standards to some degree.

A natural reaction to the responsibility view is that it merely poses the question that a theory of content seeks to answer. This reaction can be elaborated as follows. Theories of content take for granted that having a concept involves being responsible to the concept's standards. The hard problem is to say what makes a thinker subject to the relevant standards – and that is the problem to which leading theories of content are addressed. On this way of looking at things, such theories of content are all attempts to answer the question of what makes a person subject to the relevant conceptual standards.

Before responding to this reaction, it is important to emphasize that the responsibility view does not hold merely that one who has a concept is necessarily subject to its standard. Rather, it holds that being subject to a concept's standards is (at least in part) what *makes* a thinker's thought involve that concept. Thus, a view according to which a person's being subject to a concept's standards is a *consequence* of the person's having a thought involving the concept is not a version of the responsibility view. The responsibility view takes the direction of explanation to be the other way around. An explanation of why a person is subject to a concept's standards explains why the person's thought involves that concept.

Given this clarification, I want to make several closely related points. First, it is not correct that theorists of content generally advance their theories as attempts to answer the question of what makes a person subject to a concept's standards. For the most part,

neither inferential-role nor informational theorists would accept this description.⁵² They would not accept even that explaining what it is to have a concept requires explaining the thinker's being subject to the concept's standards,⁵³ and they certainly would not accept that what makes the thinker subject to the concept's standards is what makes it the case that the thinker has that concept.

Second, if the reaction were correct, what would be needed to defend a theory of content would be an argument that the theory explains what it is in virtue of which thinkers are responsible to conceptual standards. But this is not the way in which theories of content are typically defended. (For example, if we accepted the responsibility view instead of the disposition view, solving the problem of error would no longer be the focus of attention in the theory of content.)

Third, and most importantly, disposition-based theories of content would be much less appealing if the question they were designed to answer were what makes a person subject to a concept's standards. Cast as an answer to that question, disposition-view-based theories of content would hold that what it is in virtue of which a thinker is subject to a concept's standard is the thinker's having a disposition to satisfy the standard. It is difficult to see what the argument for this position could be. Whatever it is that makes it correct for someone to fulfill a given condition, it is not her being disposed to fulfill it. In general, that one is disposed to ϕ does not make it the case that one is required to ϕ , not

⁵² See Fodor, 1990, pp.128-130, 135 fn. 35.

⁵³ Notice that a constitutive account of a phenomenon need not by itself entail all necessary truths about the phenomenon. A neurophysiological account of the nature of pain would not fail on the ground that it does not account for pain's moral badness. Moral truths, rather than just truths about the nature of pain, are needed to explain the moral badness of pain.

even other things being equal. (Think of all the illegal, immoral, irrational, and silly things that people are disposed to do.)

Fourth, even if being disposed to satisfy a concept's standard made a person responsible to that standard, this possibility would not support the Demanding Position without an argument that deference were the *only* other way of being responsible to a concept's standards. But no such argument has been made.

One aspect of the reaction is correct. The responsibility view is not an answer to the content question on a par with informational or inferential-role theories of content. Rather, it is a very general view about the nature of mental content that competes with the disposition view. As such a general view, it re-poses the challenge of offering a theory of content as the challenge of explaining what makes us responsible to conceptual standards. Establishing that a theory of content must answer the question of what makes thinkers responsible to conceptual standards would entail a major shift in the theory of content. Asking the right question can itself be major progress.

As we have seen, even without a specific theory of what makes people subject to conceptual standards, the responsibility view offers the prospect of explaining how thinkers can have thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts. More generally, the responsibility view raises the possibility that we can draw on our understanding of what makes people subject to standards in other domains to explain what makes it the case that a thought involves a particular concept. (We have already implicitly relied on that understanding in arguing that having a disposition to ϕ does not make someone subject to a standard requiring that he ϕ .)

In order to develop a responsibility-view-based theory of content, it would be necessary to give an account of what makes people subject to conceptual standards. That is a large project that I do not undertake here. I will end by hazarding a (highly programmatic) suggestion.

Perhaps facts about the world play a role in determining the conceptual standards to which thinkers are subject. If a thinker is engaged in trying to understand some domain, such as mathematics, morality, or the empirical world, facts in that domain may play a role in determining the standards to which the thinker is responsible. For example, even before we discover that copper has an underlying physical nature and that weeds do not, those facts may play a role in determining that “copper” expresses a natural kind concept and “weed” does not. Since facts about the external world can play a larger role in determining what standards a thinker is responsible to than in determining what dispositions a thinker has, this approach gives facts about the world outside the thinker a larger role than they could have on leading, disposition-based externalist positions.

The implications of the responsibility view and incomplete understanding may be far-reaching. The idea that content attributions impute responsibility to standards raises serious questions about the relation between folk psychology and information-processing approaches. At a more general level, the tendency of the responsibility view is to support a strong realism about the content of our minds. If all users of a concept may incompletely understand it, that fact would explain how conceptual inquiry may aspire to more momentous goals than that of exhibiting what, at some level, all competent users of the concepts in question already understand.

9. Conclusion

I have argued that we must reject the deference assumption – the assumption that a proviso about deference to other thinkers can account for the phenomenon of incomplete understanding within the framework of leading theories of content. Even when deference to thinkers with mastery of the relevant concepts is plausibly present, it does not enable leading theories of content to explain how a thinker could have a thought involving an incomplete grasped concept. And once we give up the deference assumption, we lose the theoretical motivation for rejecting apparent cases of non-deference-based incomplete understanding. Leading theories of content have no prospect of accounting for such cases. Because the disposition view is the reason that leading theories of content cannot account for both deference and non-deference cases, the phenomenon of incomplete understanding puts pressure on the disposition view.

I offer the responsibility view only tentatively. It offers the prospect of explaining incomplete understanding and has other explanatory virtues. My main goal in this paper, however, has been to undermine the deference assumption and to explore the consequent difficulties for leading theories of content. Regardless of whether the responsibility view proposal is on the right track, the phenomenon of incomplete understanding requires attention in the theory of content.

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