Two Ways to Be Right about What One Is Thinking

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Abstract
In this paper I describe two ways in which cogito-like judgments (judgments about what one is currently thinking) might be self-verifying. I then defend my claim that the only one of these is available to Burge as a coherent way for him to elaborate his claim that cogito-like judgments are both self-verifying and central to our rationality.

Keywords
cogito; Burge; rationality; infallibility

0. Introduction

Tyler Burge has claimed that the judgments one makes about one’s own current thoughts—cogito-like judgments—are self-verifying: in making a cogito-like judgment, one thereby makes it true. In an earlier paper (Spicer 2009), I argued that Burge seems to offer two (incompatible) models of how cogito-like judgments work—one on which they are more like the cogito, one less. I argued that only the second of these models is viable, since buying into the first model involves flouting a principle about how propositional attitude ascriptions work—the Truth Condition Principle—which ought to be respected by any good picture of propositional attitude ascriptions (and hence any good picture of cogito-like judgments).

In his reply to my earlier paper, Anthony Brueckner (this issue) claims that I attack Burge’s view that cogito-like judgments are self-verifying, and he further argues that my main argument is unsuccessful, as it appeals to an implausible hidden assumption. In this paper I refute both charges. I first explain how I am not attacking the claim that cogito-like judgments are self-verifying, but rather I am attacking the view that they are self-verifying in a particular way. Here I distinguish two ways in which they might be self-verifying,
and then show that one of these ways is untenable. I then go on to show how the argument I offer for this (less ambitious) conclusion does not require the implausible assumption Brueckner identifies.

1. Cogito-like Judgments and Their Skeptical Context

A *cogito*-like judgment is a judgment such as (6):

(6) I am thinking that water is wet.

where one ascribes a propositional attitude to oneself in the present tense, but where the attitude-type ascribed is merely *thinking*—the most general determinable attitude-type, of which *judging* is a determinate. For such a judgment to be *self-verifying*, Burge means that in making the judgment, one thereby makes it true.

Brueckner sketches the skeptical context against which Burge’s picture of *cogito*-like judgments sits; he emphasizes how *cogito*-like judgments allow one to have non-empirical knowledge of one’s own thought contents, even though those thought contents are externalistically determined.

A second piece of the skeptical context of Burge’s discussion is that for Burge, the incorrigible nature of *cogito*-like judgments fits into a transcendental argument Burge builds against skeptical challenges on our rationality. Burge argues that for us to be critical thinkers (even capable of processing skeptical arguments) there are important limits on how mistaken we can be about our own thoughts. In order to be critical thinkers we need to be sensitive to the logical and evidential relationships between our own beliefs and thought contents, so that we can be subject to the norms of how we should form, maintain and revise our beliefs. Burge (1996, 105–11) considers a radical skeptical possibility, on which a subject seems to find an inconsistency between two of his thoughts, but who cannot be sure that he can distinguish accurately introspecting an inconsistent thought-pair from inaccurately introspecting a consistent pair to be inconsistent (due to being wrong about the content of one of that pair of thoughts). Burge argues that such a subject would be unable to proceed in following the norms of belief revision, and so would fail to be a critical reasoner. For us, then, to be critical reasoners capable of engaging with skeptical arguments at all, it cannot be that we

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1 This is number (6) because both Brueckner and I pick up the numbering of my earlier, 2009 paper.