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Gerken, Mikkel

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A Transcendental Argument from Testimonial Knowledge to Content Externalism

1 Introduction. Broadly characterized, transcendental arguments are arguments for a substantive conclusion X, by way of an argument that it is a necessary condition for the possibility of some general principle or phenomenon, Y (Smith 1999; Stern 1999, 2000; Brueckner 2010). We may call Y the ‘evident phenomenon’ since it is often taken to be knowable a priori or, less ambitiously, by philosophical reflection. Since Kant’s Refutation of Idealism, anti-skeptical transcendental arguments have been widely debated. Here the key evident phenomenon is that one is aware that one’s experiences occur in a specific temporal order (Kant 1782 B274–279). Thus, the argument proceeds from an evident mental phenomenon to an epistemological conclusion.

Contemporary anti-skeptical transcendental arguments often begin with another assumption from the philosophy of mind – namely, anti-individualism (Burge 1979, 1982. See Brueckner 2010 for its application in transcendental arguments). Burge articulates anti-individualism as follows:

“the natures of many mental states constitutively depend on relations between a subject matter beyond the individual and the individual that has the mental states, where relevant relations help determine specific natures of those states” (Burge 2010: 61).

Anti-individualism may be said to be an externalist theory given its claim that an individual's representational mental states are partly but constitutively determined by patterns of relations holding between the individual and the wider reality. Anti-individualism in the philosophy of mind is related to externalism in the philosophy of language (Burge 1982, 2010; Kallestrup 2011). Here the externalist thesis is, roughly, that the meanings of many words and sentences are partly determined by environmental facts that are external to the speaker’s cognitive grasp (Putnam 1975; Kripke 1980; Burge 2010). The transcendental argument that I will set forth concerns the relationship between talk and thought. Consequently, I will use ‘content externalism’ as a broad umbrella label for externalist views in language and mind alike.

The type of content externalism that I will argue for concerns representational mental concepts and states, and their representational contents, as well as linguistic items, such as words and sentences,

1 The members of the Putnam/Kripke/Burge trio do not use the term ‘externalism.’ Burge (in conversation) discouraged using it. Likewise, Burge emphasizes that anti-individualism is primarily a thesis about mental states rather than contents (Burge 2010). However, the label ‘content externalism’ has become commonplace as a broad term for these views, and, of course, according to the view, its name does not describe it.

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and their representational contents. It has it that many concepts/words and their contents are partly but constitutively determined by patterns of relations to the general external environment that the individual is embedded in. Moreover, I will argue for a type of content externalism according to which internalist factors such as phenomenality, functional role etc., may also partly individuate the nature of belief, testimony and their contents. In contrast, the target content internalism has it that such factors fully individuate the representational contents of belief and testimony. So, content internalism claims that external factors are irrelevant to the individuation conditions. It is also worth highlighting that what matters for individuation of concepts, words and their contents are patterns of relations to the general environment rather than token relations. For brevity, I will say that an individual is embedded in the relevant environment when such patterns of relations obtain. Being in an environment or being related to an environmental feature on a single occasion is insufficient for embeddedness. This abstract point may be concretized by a case. According to the present brand of content externalism, in a case in which I see a wax apple on the table, I hold an ordinary false belief that there is an apple on the table. The history of patterns of relations between apples and me (and my kin) is what is relevant for the individuation of my thought.

The type of content externalism that I will argue for may also be specified in terms of its scope. I will argue for a brand of content externalism that concerns concepts and words which concern natural kinds (e.g., apples, gold), social kinds (e.g., contracts, marriage) and artificial kinds (e.g., whisky, thrones). In stating the transcendental argument, I will consider an artificial kind which is individuated by a mix of social and natural facts – namely, whisky, which is an alcoholic beverage distilled from fermented grain mash. Some take content externalism to also apply to thoughts and language concerning mathematics (e.g., numbers) and logic (e.g., connectives) (Burge 2003). I will not consider whether a variety of the transcendental argument that I will present may support content externalism about logical connectives, numbers, sets, phenomenal mental states, etc. That is, I will only argue for content externalism about the contents of thought and talk concerning natural, social and artificial kinds. Prominent content internalists deny such a content externalism (e.g., Boghossian 1992; Segal 2000). So, the transcendental argument addresses an actual and central dispute.

As noted, some contemporary transcendental arguments take the evident phenomenon to be a thesis in the philosophy of mind (anti-individualism) and the substantive conclusion to be an epistemological one (anti-skepticism). In contrast, in the transcendental argument that I will set forth, the evident phenomenon is a non-skeptical epistemological thesis (testimonial knowledge), and the substantive conclusion is one in the philosophy of mind and language (content externalism). However, my argument shares the structural feature characteristic of Kantian and contemporary transcendental arguments: It

2 According to other varieties of content externalism, I do not have an ordinary apple-belief but a different, although indiscriminable, belief with a different representational content individuated by the specific object (the wax apple) (McDowell 2010). I doubt that the transcendental argument would go through for these types of content externalism, and it might even compromise them. But here my aim is just to specify the type of content externalism that I will argue for over content internalism.

3 Note that ‘grain’ here is used inclusively so as to include malted grain – i.e., grain (typically barley) that has been halted in a germination process and dried. So, although malt whisky is distinguished from grain whisky, malt whisky is nevertheless distilled from fermented grain.
begins from a general thesis and argues by way of general premises that a substantive philosophical thesis is a necessary condition for its possibility (a Möglichkeitsbedingung).

The key idea of the present transcendental argument is that content externalism can explain – and content internalism faces a challenge in explaining – how H can acquire testimonial knowledge that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). Given a widely accepted general no-luck constraint on knowledge, testimonial knowledge requires that it is not a matter of epistemic luck that H believes that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). Specifically, testimonial knowledge requires that it is not epistemically lucky that the communication does not involve equivocation. Epistemic luck is typically eliminated through the exercise of cognitive competences which are, in the case of testimony, constitutively associated with the representational natures of belief and testimony. Therefore, the representational natures of belief and testimony must contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). A content externalist account of the representational natures of belief and testimony provides a principled explanation of why this is the case when the testifier and the recipient are embedded in the same environment, whereas a content internalist account faces challenges in doing so. So, in a nutshell, the basic idea of the transcendental argument that I will articulate is that content externalism best explains how a no-luck constraint on knowledge through testimony is standardly met.

In unfolding the argument, I use the phrase ‘knowledge through testimony’ to denote distinctively testimonial knowledge, which contrasts with other ways of acquiring knowledge via someone’s testimony. For example, I may falsely testify ‘I am a tenor’, and you may, due to my distinctively baritone voice, come to believe, and even know, that I am a baritone (cf. Audi 1997: 420). In this case, you do not acquire knowledge through testimony but rather through your ability to identify voice types. The transcendental argument is about the psycho-semantic conditions for testimonial knowledge and, hence, belief through testimony – i.e., through basing one’s belief on the testified content. Importantly for the argument, there are cases in which H forms a belief that \( p^* \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). For example, if S testifies that there are free drinks at the bank because her banker told her so, it is possible that H forms the belief that there are free drinks by the riverside, rather than at the financial institution. In this case, H believes that \( p^* \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). Thus, belief through testimony is compatible with misunderstanding, although knowledge through testimony is not. Even if there happened to be free drinks by the riverside, H would not come to know that through S’s testimony. In this case, H forms a true belief that \( p^* \) through S’s testimony that \( p \) (I elaborate on this point in Section 4). The transcendental argument concerns the conditions under which H acquires testimonial knowledge through testimony.

2: The transcendental argument. The evident phenomenon of the present transcendental argument is the general epistemological thesis that we can come to know that \( p \) through others’ testimony that \( p \). However, the argument can be articulated more straightforwardly via a paradigmatic instance of this general thesis. So, assume that S testifies that \( p \) and H forms a testimonial belief that \( p \) through S’s testimony. For brevity, I will occasionally use the term ‘univocal’ for cases in which H believes that \( p \) and S testifies that \( p \). Modulo cases of reference
failure, univocality requires co-reference but not vice versa. If S believes that Hesperus is hot and H believes that Phosphorus is hot, their belief contents are co-referential but not univocal.

Let \( \mathbf{p} \) be the proposition that there is whisky in the jar. Assume, moreover, that H has no particular background knowledge of S’s reliability or specific communicative intentions. Thus, the case is a minimal background information case. Here is the argument from such cases:

\( \text{T1: } \text{H can come to know that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p. \quad \text{[Premise]} \)

\( \text{T2: } \text{H can come to know that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p \text{ only if it is not epistemically lucky that H believes that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p. \quad \text{[Premise]} \)

\( \text{T3: } \text{It is not epistemically lucky that H believes that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p \text{ only if the general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p. \quad \text{[Premise]} \)

\( \text{T4: } \text{The general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes that } p \text{ through S’s testimony that } p \text{ only if both H’s belief and S’s testimony are partly individuated by reference to non-individualistic features of their common environment.} \quad \text{[Premise]} \)

\( \text{TC: } \text{Both H’s belief and S’s testimony are partly individuated by reference to non-individualistic features of their common environment.} \quad \text{[T1-T4]} \)

Let us call the consequent of T2/antecedent of T3 ‘the no luck constraint.’ Let us call the consequent of T3/antecedent of T4 ‘the no accident constraint.’ Since it is highly controversial whether T1 is a priori, TC may not be a priori. But since T1-T4 may be motivated by philosophical reflection, the transcendental argument motivates content externalism in a distinctively philosophical manner.

3: Premise T1. T1 is both commonsensical and epistemological orthodoxy. The premise T1 reflects the epistemological assumption that H can acquire testimonial knowledge that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \) in cases where H has minimal background beliefs about S. However, the argument will not be

\[4 \text{ I will sidestep complexities concerning univocality and reference failure, but see (Gerken 2007, 2013a Chapter II.vii.d).} \]

\[5 \text{ I take this assumption to be dialectically benign insofar as content internalists are committed to it. While some Millian externalists may question it, the assumption is compatible with the branch of content externalism defended here – i.e., one according to which external factors only partly individuate content and content-bearing states.} \]
compromised if we assume that H is epistemically vigilant in the manner suggested by Fricker or by Sperber et al. (Fricker 1994; Sperber et al. 2010; Graham 2010). So, T1 does not by itself presuppose any substantive epistemology of testimony. Likewise, T1 does not by itself presuppose any substantive theory of linguistic or mental content. Here I will not defend the premise against skeptical doubters since the present transcendental argument does not purport to motivate any epistemological conclusions. Rather, it seeks to motivate a substantive thesis in the philosophy of mind and language from epistemological assumptions. While H may be contested, it is sufficiently plausible to explore its consequences in conjunction with other plausible, albeit more controversial, assumptions. Of course, it is a dialectical limitation of the present transcendental argument that it will not convince skeptics about testimonial knowledge. But the argument’s target group is not skeptics but content internalists who are generally happy to accept T1 as stated. After articulating the transcendental argument, I will briefly return to its ramifications for the epistemology of testimony and, in particular, for anti-skeptical transcendental arguments from content externalism (cf. Section 7).

4: Premise T2. The premise T2 is a variety of a familiar no luck constraint on knowledge which may be motivated by reflection on cases of epistemically lucky true belief (Pritchard 2005). Assume that I form the belief that p on no rational basis whatsoever, but the belief turns out to be true. In such a case, it is too epistemically lucky that my belief is true for it to qualify as knowledge.6 There are testimonial instances of epistemic luck as well. Recall the case in which S testifies ‘there are free drinks at the bank on Wednesday’ because she knows that there are free drinks at the financial institution on Wednesday. However, H forms, through S’s testimony, the belief that there are free drinks by the riverside. Unbeknownst to H, however, a political organization is offering free drinks by the riverside on Wednesday. Again, it is too lucky that H’s belief is true for it to qualify as knowledge (Goldberg 2007a).7 More plainly, perhaps, assume that due to entirely irrational emotional factors, I trust S, although all the available evidence indicates that S is not speaking truthfully. However, S falsely believes that not p. But trying to deceive me, S asserts that p. So, I form a true testimonial belief that p. Yet again, it is too lucky that my belief that p is true for it to qualify as knowledge or even as warranted.8

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6 I use the phrase that a belief may ‘qualify as knowledge’ without the presumption that knowledge may be reductively analyzed (Gerken 2013a: 25; 2017a-b).

7 Little should hinge on whether the case is best understood as a Gettier-style case or a case of unwarranted true belief.

8 Subtler cases are more controversial. Consider Graham’s case of Inverted Allan (Graham 2000, 2016) in which Allan’s color experiences, concepts and words are inverted: Alan experiences yellow when seeing the blue sky and testifies his thought that the sky is yellow to Eddie by the sentence ‘the sky is blue.’ But neither of them is aware that Alan is different from everybody else. Graham gives the following diagnosis: “When Eddie misrepresents Alan’s assertion, but relies on him nonetheless, Eddie gets what he needs for knowledge” (Graham 2016: 180). In contrast, my diagnosis is that Eddie enjoys testimonial warrant but not testimonial knowledge. The two representational wrongs (Alan’s misrepresentation of the color and Eddie’s misrepresentation of Alan’s testimony) do not make an epistemic right. Rather, they constitute a deviant causal chain characteristic of Gettier-style cases. (See below for supporting arguments. See also Gerken 2011, 2013a in which I argue that knowledge is defeated by a similar kind of lucky equivocation in ‘slow switch’ cases (Burge 1988; Boghossian 1992)).
Note that these kinds of epistemic luck differ from mere environmental luck (Pritchard 2005) which may occur when it is lucky that S testifies to H. For example, it may be entirely random that H encounters S, who is the only person with information about \( p \). In such a case, H may come to know that \( p \) through S’s testimony. The luck of the encounter is environmental luck which does not compromise the epistemic status of H’s testimonial belief that \( p \). In contrast, the types of luck sketched above differ from such environmental luck and are standardly taken to compromise knowledge. Perhaps a content internalist might argue that it is environmentally lucky that S and H are in a non-deceptive environment in which miscommunication due to equivocation is rare. But such a conception of environmental luck is highly revisionary and not motivated by the standard cases of environmental luck. For example, this conception of environmental luck would have it that S’s true belief that he did not win the lottery is environmentally lucky. So, while it is worth acknowledging this internalist response strategy, it is one that requires considerable argument and conceptual development.

Since the transcendental argument is cast in terms of testimonial knowledge, I focus on how epistemic luck is inconsistent with knowledge. However, in some cases, this is because epistemic luck is inconsistent with epistemic warrant, which is a non-factive necessary condition on knowledge (Gerken 2018, 2020a, b). Assume, for example, that S forms a belief that the Queen has decided to bestow knighthood upon him through the testimony of his knight-obsessed four-year-old child. In this case, S’s belief is not warranted and, hence, not a candidate for knowledge. Apart from motivating that epistemic luck may be inconsistent with non-factive testimonial warrant, such cases also suggest that cognitive competence is involved in eliminating or minimizing epistemic luck. That is, epistemic luck differs from other types of luck, such as environmental luck, in that it is connected to cognitive competences (Levy 2011; Pritchard 2012). For example, a belief may be said to be epistemically lucky when it is true but when this is not due to its being produced by a truth-conducive competence. While this point is not always explicated in these terms, the general idea is compatible with many epistemological frameworks. For example, it figures prominently in virtue epistemology (Pritchard 2012). But the idea is also present in earlier no-accident theories of knowledge (Dretske 1971; Unger 1979; Nozick 1981). For example, both Dretske and Nozick, who are both epistemic externalists, assume that the modal conditions on knowledge are relativized to the agent’s methods, and this is akin to the idea that cognitive competences help exclude epistemic luck (Dretske 1971; Nozick 1981). Of course, there are substantive differences between modal and virtue epistemic approaches. However, my point is not to recommend any of these but to illustrate how the idea that cognitive competences are central to minimizing epistemic luck is compatible with different epistemological frameworks.

In sum, while testimonial knowledge differs from other kinds of knowledge, it does not differ significantly with regard to the no-luck constraint which is widely accepted in the epistemology of testimony (Gelfert 2014). Consequently, I will not defend the no-luck constraint on testimonial knowledge any further here, although it may, of course, be challenged.

5: Premise T3. According to premise T3, the no-luck constraint on testimonial belief is met only if the no-accident constraint on testimonial belief is met. T3 is not the claim that the representational natures of belief and testimony are required to explain that it is not accidental that \( p \) is identical to \( p \) as this would be trivial. Rather, T3 makes a claim about H’s belief – namely, that it is not epistemically lucky that H comes to believe that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \) only given a certain no-accident condition. This no-accident condition requires that the
general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes $p$ through S's testimony that $p$. This is not trivial. Recall that even in the successful case in which S forms the belief that $p$ through S's testimony that $p$, S could have misunderstood S and formed a belief with another content, $p^*$. Consequently, it may be accidental and, moreover, epistemically lucky that H believes $p$ through S's testimony that $p$.

So, given that testimonial knowledge is incompatible with epistemic luck, we must ask ourselves under which circumstances it is not epistemically lucky that H believes $p$ through S's testimony that $p$. According to T3, a necessary condition is that the general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes $p$ through S's testimony that $p$. Since testimonial knowledge involves a reliable transmission of content, it is plausible that the representational natures of content and the relevant content-bearers – i.e., belief and testimony – must figure in an explanation of why this transmission is not accidental.

Thus, T3 expresses the basic idea that the general representational natures of belief and testimony are relevant for the epistemic properties of testimonial belief. More generally, T3 exemplifies the idea that the general representational natures of content-bearers help explain their epistemic status. For dialectical purposes, it is worth noting that content internalists have frequently embraced this general idea and taken it to motivate their various accounts (Fodor 1987; Segal 1991, 2000; Boghossian 1992, 1994; Brown 1995; Farkas 2008; Pollock 2015).

I will motivate T3 in stages. First, I argue that it is not epistemically lucky that H believes that $p$ through H's testimony that $p$ only if it is non-accidental. Second, I argue that the no-luck constraint requires that the general representational natures of testimony and belief contribute to a principled explanation of this non-accidentality.

To establish some initial common ground, I first consider a case in which the no-luck constraint is violated because the no-accident constraint is violated. To keep the motivation neutral between content internalists and externalists, the individuation conditions of belief and testimony do not explain this violation. This may be done by following Lewis Carroll in stipulating that Humpty Dumpty’s use of a word “means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” (Carroll 1971/[1865]). Invoking the Carrollesque thought experiment does not presuppose that Humpty Dumpty’s brand of private language is possible on its own. Indeed, the result that it precludes effective communication might be a reason to doubt its general viability. But Humpty Dumpty-style cases may illustrate that the no-luck condition holds only if the no-

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9 Brown and Fodor eventually accepted content externalism (Fodor 1994; Brown 2004). The point here is merely that their internalist writings share the idea characteristic of T3 – namely, that the individuation conditions of content must be able to explain aspects of epistemic rationality.

10 However, I will not pursue yet another transcendental argument to this effect.
accident constraint holds. Moreover, the illustration does not presuppose content internalism or content externalism. Since the linguistic meanings of Humpty Dumpty’s words depend on his intentions, the individuation of his intentions determine whether the meanings of his words are internistically or externalistically individuated. However, the case may establish the initial point about accidentality without any commitments in this regard.

As the story goes, Humpty Dumpty asserts ‘there is glory for you’ with the intention that ‘glory’ means a nice knock-down argument. Assume further that he has in fact just given a nice knock-down argument. However, let us add to the story that Alice does not know the meaning of ‘glory’ and she looks it up in a dictionary. However, the dictionary is scrambled in a few places. And – you guessed it! – one of the scrambled entries is the one for ‘glory’ which is, by freak accident, glossed as ‘a nice knock-down argument.’ So, Alice forms a true belief – through Humpty Dumpty’s testimony – that there is a nice knock-down argument for her. This accident arises from the fact that the scrambled dictionary happens to define ‘glory’ in just the idiosyncratic way Mr. Dumpty intends. However, the accident does not arise from what generally determines the contents of belief or testimony. So, content internalists and externalists may agree that the no epistemic luck constraint is met only if it is not accidental that S comes to believe that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). They may also agree that part of the epistemic problem is that the general representational nature of the belief and testimony do not explain why Alice comes to believe that \( p \) through Humpty Dumpty’s testimony that \( p \).

Furthermore, content internalists and externalists should be able to agree that even if it is non-accidental that S comes to believe that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \), it may still be epistemically lucky (Pritchard 2005, Ch. 5). This further point may be illustrated by a testimonial “guardian angel” case in which the direction of fit between belief and its object is reversed. Assume that Humpty Dumpty’s intention is that ‘wabe’ means whatever Alice supposes that it means and testifies that there is a wabe on the lawn. Alice “surprised by her own ingenuity” correctly supposes that “the wabe is the grass-plot round a sun-dial” (Carroll 1971/[1865]). Even if we stipulate that Alice’s supposition amounts to a belief, she does not know by testimony that there is a grass-plot around a sun-dial on the lawn. Such cases are standardly taken to exemplify true belief that is not knowledge because the truth is not due to H’s truth-conducive cognitive competence (Pritchard 2012; Gerken 2013a: 295). The meaning of ‘wabe’ tracks Alice’s belief about it rather than vice versa. So, regardless of whether Alice’s belief is cognitively competent or not, it is true. As noted, acquiring true belief in virtue of exercise of cognitive competence is a big part of what helps to exclude epistemic luck. Consequently, the case is aptly characterized as one in which it is epistemically lucky that H comes to believe that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). As above, the case does not depend on assumptions about the general

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11 These assumptions are not explicit in the text.
individuation of words, concepts or their contents. Hence, content internalists and externalists may agree that not every type of non-accident excludes epistemic luck.

Consequently, we need a specification of the type of non-accident that excludes epistemic luck. Further reflection on the cases suggests a partial specification. The discussed cases of accidentality and the type of non-accidentality that is epistemically lucky have an important feature in common. In both types of cases, the general representational natures of testimony and belief do not contribute to a principled explanation of why H comes to believe that $p$ through S’s testimony that $p$. In the testimonial guardian angel case, for example, what explains the univocality of content is not general facts about testimony and belief but highly extra-ordinary facts about Mr. Dumpty’s linguistic intentions. This point suggests that in cases that result in testimonial knowledge, the general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to a principled explanation of why it is not accidental that H believes $p$ through S’s testimony that $p$. If a factor is absent in the cases that are too epistemically lucky to amount to testimonial knowledge and present in the cases that amount to testimonial knowledge because luck has been eliminated, it is plausible that this factor is important for testimonial knowledge in virtue of being central to eliminating epistemic luck. Non-accidental content univocality that is partly explained by the general representational nature of the content bearers (i.e., belief and testimony) is just such a factor. This give us a strong reason to uphold T3, and this reason does not presuppose content internalism or content externalism.

Finally, the assumption that luck is eliminated by the exercise of relevant cognitive competences also provides a reason to uphold T3 given the assumption that the general representational natures of belief and testimony are constitutively related to the cognitive competences (Lawlor 2001; Gerken 2013a). But this assumption should be plausible to content internalists and externalists alike given that mental and linguistic representations are the product of cognitive competences. So, T3 reflects the general idea that the representational natures (including the individuation conditions) of belief and testimony are closely connected to cognitive competence and, thereby, to epistemic status. Hence, T3 marks a principled connection between the representational nature and the epistemic status of testimonial belief. In this manner, T3 gains motivation from reflection on cases as well as from more theoretical considerations.

Since the dialectic is subtle, let me recap. First, the case of ‘glory’ motivates the idea that it is common ground between content internalists and externalists that the no-luck constraint is met only if it is not accidental that H comes to believe that $p$ through S’s testimony that $p$. Second, the direction-of-fit variation of the ‘wabe’ case motivates that it may be epistemically lucky that H believes that $p$ through S’s testimony that $p$ even if this is non-accidental. Third, reflections on the relationship between competence and content-bearers (belief and testimony, respectively) motivates that the no-luck constraint is met only if the general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to an explanation of the non-accidental univocality.
Together these different considerations motivate T3. From a dialectical standpoint, it is noteworthy that both content internalists and externalists have emphasized the type of explanatory connection between the nature of mental and linguistic representation and epistemic status that T3 exemplifies. For example, Boghossian has argued for content internalism on the grounds that it may explain varieties of epistemic rationality which he argues that content externalism cannot explain (Boghossian 1992, 1994). So, in other contexts, context internalists have embraced the view, exemplified by T3, that the general representational natures of beliefs and their contents must partly but centrally explain their epistemic status.

In sum, T3 connects the epistemic no-luck constraint to a no-accident constraint that requires a principled explanation of non-accidental univocality in terms of the representational natures of belief and testimony. I have sought to motivate T3 in a way that is neutral between content internalism and content externalism. But further non-neutral motivation may be given by outlining a content externalist explanation of the non-accidental univocality in terms of the individuation conditions of testimony and belief. Hence, I will turn to the final premise, T4.

6: Premise T4. T4 is motivated by the claim that content externalism provides the best explanation of how the no-accident constraint is met. Since content externalists accept that embedding in the environment partly determines representational content, and content internalists reject this, the two accounts are mutually exclusive. So, insofar as content externalism offers an account of the no-accident constraint that is better than its content internalist competitor, content externalism may be reasonably supposed to be required by the no-accident constraint. Thus, T4 may be abductively motivated. Consequently, I will first sketch the content externalist explanation. Subsequently, I will briefly raise some general challenges for the prospects of a content internalist alternative.

According to the content externalist explanation of the no-accident constraint, it is not accidental that H believes p through S’s testimony that p because S and H are embedded in a common external environment. Content externalists have it that patterns of relations to the same environment partly explain the representational natures of both S’s testimony and H’s belief. Thus, the general representational natures of S’s testimony and H’s belief provide a central contribution to the explanation of the successful case in which it is not accidental that H comes to believe that p through S’s testimony that p. Specifically, the externalist explanation has it that similar patterns of relation to the same external environment help explain why the testimony and the belief have the contents that they have.

For example, given the testimony ‘there is whisky in the jar,’ a relevant part of the external environment is the liquid whisky. In testimony about natural kinds (e.g., ‘there is gold in the ore’), general features of the physical environment are central. In testimony about social kinds (e.g., ‘the book is under contract’), the conventions of the social environment are important (Burge 1979). In each case, the fact that S and H are embedded in the same general environment helps individuate both the content of the belief and the testimony. This, in turn, helps explain why it is not accidental that H believes that p through S’s testimony that p.  

12 Please ignore that whisky is occasionally “in the head.”
This explanation of the no-accident constraint in terms of the general representational nature of belief and testimony is unavailable to the types of content internalists under consideration. This is because such content internalists reject that patterns of relations to general features of the broader environment partly individuate belief and testimony in terms of their representational contents. Consequently, the agents’ relations to the broader environment cannot figure in a content internalist account of how the no-accident constraint is met. Even though H and S are de facto embedded in the same environment, this is, according to the content internalist, irrelevant to how the general representational natures of belief and testimony contribute to an explanation of non-accidentality. For H’s and S’s embedding in the environment plays no role in content internalist accounts of the general representational natures of belief and testimony or their representational contents.

So, the core of the motivation for T4 is that the content externalist account of the no-accident constraint can – whereas the content internalist account cannot – cite patterns of relations to the common environment that both H and S stand in. This core motivation for T4 may be augmented in various ways, of which I will consider two: First, the sketched content externalist account of how the no-accident constraint is met includes a natural extension to cases in which it is, according to content externalists, violated. Second, the motivation for T4 coheres well with a unified mind-language-epistemology externalist framework for testimonial knowledge.

Since these augmentations of the core motivation for T4 are dialectically subtle, I will add a brief methodological interlude after outlining how content externalists may account for violations of the no-accident constraint. The account may be illustrated by the following case: Assume that S and H are embedded in relevantly distinct environments. Specifically, assume that H was raised in an environment where he interacted with whisky – the artificial kind that we know and love. But assume that S was raised in a causally insulated environment where the twin-whisky – a liquid called ‘whisky’ – is a phenomenally indistinguishable alcoholic liquid that is naturally produced in giant mushrooms. For the convenience of the reader, I add superscripts indicating the type of liquid, using ‘E’ for the artificial kind, whisky, and ‘TE’ for the natural kind, twin-whisky. Assume further that on Earth, a liquid qualifies as whiskyE only if it is distilled from fermented grains, and on Twin Earth, a liquid qualifies as whiskyTE only if it is tapped from giant mushrooms. Finally, assume that the origins and natures of both liquids are unknown by the public in general or by S and H in particular but that this information is nevertheless important for commercial purposes. Assume, for example, that on Earth, it is illegal to use the label ‘whisky’ for a liquid that is not distilled from fermented grains.

According to the content externalist account, S and H miscommunicate in this case since H would form a false belief that there is whiskyE in the jar through S’s true testimony that there is whiskyTE in the jar. Alternatively, assume that there is whiskyE in the jar. If so, content externalists would diagnose the case as one in which S provides a false testimony on the basis of a false belief that there is whiskyTE in the jar. But H would misunderstand the testimony and form the true belief that there is whiskyE in the jar through S’s testimony. According to the unified mind-language-epistemology externalism, it is epistemically lucky that H generates a true testimonial belief on the basis of equivocation. Since the role of the assumption that there is equivocation is dialectically subtle, I will add the promised methodological interlude.

The extension of the content externalist account to cases in which the no-accident constraint is not met overlaps with broader debates between content internalists and externalists.
For example, the whisky^E/whisky^TE case has a twin-Earth structure, and the assumption about equivocation may serve as the basis for more direct arguments against content internalism (Burge 1979; Gerken 2011, 2013a). Such arguments have proven to be contentious. Many content internalists will reject that the case exemplifies communication due to equivocation. But other content internalists may accept this assumption and pursue an internalist account of it. So, the assumption of equivocation does not by itself entail the falsity of content internalism. Importantly, however, the present role of the equivocation assumption is more modest than that of a premise in a direct twin-Earth argument against content internalism. It merely serves as a part of the abductive case for a weaker thesis – namely, T4. Generally, the force of an abductive argument comes from building a unified account of a wide range of cases. Indeed, it would be problematic if the content externalist account of the successful case could not be extended to an unsuccessful case (Pollock 2015). So, rather than providing the basis for a contentious independent argument against content internalism, the twin case illustrates how content externalism may, on its own terms, diagnose certain cases as exemplifying unsuccessful communication due to equivocation. This strengthens the overall abductive case for the content externalist account of the no-accident constraint case and, hence, of T4.

With this dialectical point in place, let us turn to the epistemology of testimony. While T4 does not involve testimonial knowledge, the present motivation for T4 coheres well with a content externalist account of testimonial knowledge. According to such an account, testimonial knowledge frequently occurs in part because testifiers and recipients are frequently are embedded in the same broader environment. However, if H and S are embedded in different environments, testimonial knowledge is not acquired in minimal background cases. Since H would form a false belief that there is whisky^E in the jar through S’s true testimony that there is whisky^TE in the jar, H would not come to know that there is whisky^E in the jar due to the violation of factivity of knowledge. While this epistemological account inherits the noted dialectical limitations associated with the equivocation assumption, it contributes to the abductive motivation of T4. Specifically, the fact that the motivation of T4 coheres well with a unified content externalist account of testimonial knowledge is a point in favor of it. The abductive motivation for T4 does not come from non-question-begging arguments that seek to directly compromise content

This is not to say that content externalists cannot cogently argue that there are twin cases that exemplify rational equivocation. For example, it may be a stipulation of the case that both interlocutors intend or presuppose that ‘whisky’ refers to a unique kind of liquid. Likewise, it may be stipulated that H and S are disposed to take the case to be an equivocation calling for a terminological distinction if they were informed that whisky^E and whisky^TE are radically different liquids. Of course, various responses to such stipulations are available to content internalists. However, while these should be discussed, the suggestion that the twin case manifests equivocation is not an ad hoc assumption by the content externalist. For an argument against the view that the interlocutors’ beliefs are partly constituted by an amalgam-concept that refers to the disjunction of whisky^E and whisky^TE, see (Gerken 2013a: 183-190)
internalism. Rather, it comes from the content externalist’s ability to provide a unified account of both cases of successful and unsuccessful communication.

Of course, several assumptions of the content externalist account sketched above are objectionable to content internalists. The challenge for content internalists, then, is to provide a general account of cases in which the no-accident constraint is met, as well as cases in which it is violated. Such a content internalist account of the no-accident constraint in terms of the general representational natures of belief and testimony cannot appeal to the fact that H and S stand in similar relations to similar aspects of their environments. I have outlined how a content externalist may provide a principled and unified account of why the no-accident constraint is met in some cases and violated in others. The account is principled and unified because it centrally invokes the externalist individuation conditions of the representational natures of belief and testimony in both types of cases.

Content internalists may seek to account for the no-accident constraint by appealing to functional role, associated descriptions, responsiveness to cues, phenomenality, etc. For example, content internalists may argue that the term ‘whisky,’ and the corresponding concept, play the same functional role in H’s and S’s respective psychologies. Others argue that H and S associate the same – or a relevantly similar – description with ‘whisky.’ However, the functional role or description in question must not merely help to explain that H comes to believe that \( p \) through S’s testimony that \( p \). T4 requires that the account of belief and testimony contribute to an explanation of why this is not accidental. So, the content internalist faces a tension between articulating a functional role or description that captures the no-accidentality in question and doing so individualistically – that is, without reference to the fact that H and S are embedded in the same environment. At this point, different challenges apply to different versions of content internalism. For example, descriptivist versions face the challenge that while people may associate a description with ‘whisky,’ it is less clear that they associate a description of the specificity that the no-accident constraint would require. Functional role accounts, in turn, may be challenged by further variations of the case, such as the stipulation that H and S presuppose or intend to speak about a unique type of liquid. A content internalist who seeks to reject the equivocation assumption of the twin case then faces the challenge of arguing that the agent’s communicative intentions or presuppositions are irrelevant for the functional role which is said to individuate the terms and concepts. Alternatively, content internalists may accept that the uniqueness presupposition is an important part of the functional role or associated description. This approach would allow content internalists to accept the equivocation assumption in the twin case. But it may well be more challenging to articulate such a function or description without reference to the wider environment.

I do not note these challenges as independent arguments against content internalism. Rather, I note them to indicate that different content internalist strategies yield very different accounts which, in turn, face different challenges. So, while several content internalist accounts of the no-accident constraint deserve consideration, they may only be responsibly criticized in a piecemeal manner. Consequently, I focus on raising the general challenge that must be addressed by every content internalist who seeks to reject T4. This is to account for the no-accident constraint in terms of general representational natures of belief and testimony when it is assumed that relations to the environment are irrelevant to those natures unless they are transparent to the agents. Attempts to meet this challenge must be measured against the content externalist account of the no-accident constraint which appeals to the fact that S and H are embedded in the same physical and social environment. If a content internalist cannot provide an equally
good overall explanation, the content externalist explanation of no-accidental univocality may be taken to be correct and, therefore, to motivate T4. Different content internalist accounts of the no-accident constraint are worth pursuing, but they must be developed specifically as a unified account of the no-accident constraint. Before it is productive to critically assess them. So, my aim in this section has been to indicate what such developments must be compared to. This is a content externalist account that partly explains how the no-accident constraint is met or violated in terms of whether S and H are embedded in the same environment. The various arguments that content externalism explains the no-accident constraint better than its internalist competitor motivate the idea that the no-accident constraint requires content externalism and that is, in a nutshell, T4.

The sketched content externalist account leads to the positive dimension of the transcendental argument – namely, the idea of a unified externalism which integrates content externalism with epistemic externalism. In the final section, I will briefly explore this positive dimension.

7: Ramifications for the epistemology of testimony. Before considering the epistemological ramifications of the transcendental argument, let me just recap its main idea without some of the minute details and qualifications noted in the piecemeal motivation of its premises. Roughly, the basic idea of the transcendental argument is this: Content externalism explains better than its internalist competitors how a no-luck constraint on testimonial knowledge is standardly met in cases where the testifier and recipient are embedded in the same environment. Given that we standardly acquire knowledge through testimony in such cases, this speaks in favor of content externalism. The ramifications of the transcendental argument for the epistemology of testimony are many. Here I will mainly seek to highlight how the transcendental argument suggests a unified externalism – i.e., an integration of externalism about mind, language and epistemology. However, I will not spell out arguments proper. (So, think of this section as an exploratory “bonus section” within the context of discovery.)

The present transcendental argument stands in a complex relationship to contemporary anti-skeptical arguments from anti-individualism or, more broadly, content externalism. First, the substantive conclusion of the present transcendental argument entails content externalism which, in turn, serves the role of the evident phenomenon of contemporary anti-skeptical transcendental arguments (Brueckner 2010). Second, the evident phenomenon of my transcendental argument presupposes the sort of anti-skepticism that resembles the conclusion of contemporary anti-skeptical arguments from content externalism.

One consequence is that if the present transcendental argument were the only motivation for content externalism views, it would be circular to assume content externalism as the evident phenomenon in an anti-skeptical transcendental argument. However, there are independent motivations for content externalism (Putnam 1974; Kripke 1980; Burge 1982, 2010). So, it is reasonable to investigate how content externalism bears on the epistemology of testimony. Moreover, the anti-skeptical project may be set aside for the purpose of exploring the relationship between the individuation of speakers’ testimonies, hearers’ beliefs and their respective epistemic properties (Goldberg 2007a, 2007b, 2015).14

14 The literature contains several related, albeit substantially different, arguments (e.g., Heck 1995; Goldberg 2007a). Responsibly presenting and criticizing these arguments would require full-length papers. For example, Heck’s paper is a complex one that involves a good deal of philosophy of language. Likewise, the statement of the premises of

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In particular, externalism in epistemology and externalism in philosophy of mind/language may be mutually reinforcing (Burge 2003, 2013; Gerken 2013a-b, 2020a). According to the present transcendental argument, environmental conditions play an important role in the epistemology of testimony. For example, it is an important assumption that when H acquires testimonial knowledge in minimal background cases, this is partly explained by the fact that S and H stand in relevantly similar patterns of relation to the broader environment (Gerken 2013a; Graham 2015). The content externalist account of successful minimal background cases trades on the assumption that H and S are embedded in

Goldberg's argument spans several book pages (p. 104-106), and, since the argument is enthymematic, further pages explain the steps (p. 106-108). So, I will just note some substantive differences from the transcendental argument under discussion.

Heck's related argument seeks to refute the hybrid view that a Fregean Sinn-based account applies to propositional attitudes but not to sentences (Heck 1995). But whereas Heck's argument also concerns the conditions for successful communication and the risk of equivocation, its conclusion is simply the denial of the hybrid view and some corollaries, such as the conditional "that the meaning of a proper name exceeds its reference if belief is intensional" (Heck 1995: 82). In contrast, the present argument's conclusion is the doctrine of content externalism. Whether Heck's argument and the present one are in tension or congenial depends partly on whether a Fregean account is taken to be intrinsically internalist or, as (Burge 2005) argues, compatible with externalism. Thanks to an anonymous referee.

Goldberg's argument also argues for content externalism from testimonial considerations. But structurally and substantially, his argument is very different. For example, Goldberg's argument revolves around public linguistic norms, whereas the present one does not. So, some internalist objections to this feature of Goldberg's argument do not apply to the present one. For example, internalists may argue that Goldberg's argument equivocates on the phrase 'public linguistic norms.' A key assumption in Goldberg's main argument is that the public linguistic norms can vary while interlocutors remain individualistic twins (his Premise 1). Arguably, this requires that the public linguistic norms are merely norms in the sense of being a standard of correct application rather than norms which the individual relies on. However, in Chapter 2, while motivating a premise in a sub-argument for Premise 1, Goldberg suggests that the hearer must be guided by or rely on the norms in recovering the content of testimony. And in Chapter 3, Goldberg characterizes public linguistic norms by stating that the norms "...are at least implicitly exploited by the hearer in the process by which she arrives at a representation of the speech she observed" (p. 83). Another major difference is that Goldberg's argument is a brand of a twin argument, and the present one is a transcendental argument. For example, Goldberg's argument 1 is motivated by a twin scenario following Burge 1986 (Goldberg 2007a, Section 4.3: 108ff). Goldberg argues that his twin argument differs from those by Putnam and Burge. But I suspect that internalists who have a lot to say about twin arguments for conclusions concerning mental states will also have a lot to say about twin arguments for premises concerning public linguistic norms. I do not highlight these putative objections to Goldberg's argument for the purpose of criticism but to indicate central differences from the present argument, which is not a twin argument, and which does not appeal to public linguistic norms. Hence, some objections applicable to Goldberg's argument do not apply to the present one. Of course, this cuts both ways. Some objections to the present argument do not apply to Goldberg's argument. For example, T1 is essential to the present argument, whereas Goldberg's argument might go through even if T1 were false. That is, Goldberg might argue directly that differences in the linguistic contents yield different testimonial belief contents rather than first argue that the recipients acquire different knowledge. Since some objections that apply to one argument do not apply to the other one, the differences between them are substantive rather than merely stylistic. Thanks to Goldberg for discussion of his argument.

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relevantly similar ways to relevantly similar social and physical environments. A unified externalist account has it that this assumption holds insofar as the premise T1 is true – i.e., in minimal background cases where H acquires testimonial knowledge. However, the transcendental argument highlights that, according to content externalism, there is a risk of equivocation due to differing environmental embeddings. An important epistemological corollary is that knowledge and warrant by testimony require some environmental stability. Unnoticeable differences in the social and physical environment may amount to an important kind of defeating condition for testimonial knowledge (compare this with the discussion of slow-switching in Gerken 2009, 2011, 2013a). In general, then, reflection on the individuation of testimony and belief may help specify important kinds of defeaters to testimonial knowledge and warrant. Likewise, such reflection may help specify the factors that secure a stable social environment.\(^{15}\)

Here I have only discussed the conditions on testimonial knowledge that pertain to the univocality of content. However, other aspects are involved in the uptake of testimony that are not epistemically lucky. For example, it may be that H must reliably recognize that S is testifying that \(p\) as opposed to performing some other speech act (appraising \(p\), questioning \(p\) etc.) I conjecture that the recognition of a speech act is guided by external social conventions that may or may not be stable. If so, a unified externalism may also illuminate this aspect of testimonial knowledge. On this occasion, I do not mention the issue to settle it but only to indicate the wider array of issues that may be given a unified externalist treatment.

The highlighted role of the external environment in determining testimonial knowledge and warrant reinforces an epistemically externalist assumption: There can be cases in which two hearers, H and H*, differ in terms of testimonial entitlement although everything except social and environmental factors are held fixed (Gerken 2013b gives examples and independent arguments). Thus, the transcendental argument for content externalism suggests a unified externalism (Burge 2003; Graham 2012; Gerken 2013a-b, 2020a-b). From a dialectical standpoint, the case for this unified epistemology-mind-language externalism may beg questions against epistemological skeptics, epistemological internalists and content internalists. Nevertheless, the different strands of motivation lend abductive credibility to a unified externalist framework. Philosophical frameworks are rarely motivated by isolated arguments, and this case is no exception. But the present transcendental argument adds to the broader motivation for such a unified externalist framework that should be developed further.

8: Concluding remarks. My central aim has been to articulate the argument from testimonial knowledge to content externalism. Although the argument is a transcendental one, it is inconclusive inasmuch as content internalists may direct interesting objections against each premise. Given the many varieties of content internalism, it would not be fruitful to try to respond preemptively to putative responses. It is more productive to simply set forth the transcendental argument and encourage responses from content internalists. However, I have briefly indicated some wider ramifications of the argument which should be explored further.

\(^{15}\) See Gerken 2013b, Graham 2015 and Simion forthcoming for some different approaches.

\(^{16}\) This paper derives from a draft from 2005 in which the argument proceeded from a thesis about inferential justification – the topic of my 2007 UCLA dissertation (published as Gerken 2013a). I gave this version as a talk at UCLA’s Albritton Society in May 2006 and subsequently benefitted from discussions with Anthony Brueckner, Peter

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Graham, Matthew Lockard, Nikolaj JLL Pedersen and Luca Struble. My advisor, Tyler Burge, gave some helpful, but less than encouraging, comments. So, I shelved the paper until 2009 when I was invited to be a critic at an APA symposium on (Goldberg 2007a) which contained a transcendental argument of its own (cf. footnote 13). So, I reworked my argument to proceed from the possibility of testimonial knowledge and spent most of my comments arguing that Goldberg’s argument was flawed whereas mine was flawless. Despite this unseemly display of youthful self-absorption, Goldberg took it gracefully and provided helpful comments over the next decade during which I sporadically revised the paper. I also benefited from comments from Jesper Kallestrup, Krista Lawlor and Nikolaj Nottelmann. In May 2018, I presented the argument at Glasgow University, and the helpful feedback convinced me to publish it. I have received a number of helpful referee reports from various journals, but I would like to highlight Referee No. 2 (sic) from Noûs. Many thanks to all the interlocutors and especially to those that I have doubtlessly forgotten and, as always, Julie Brummer.

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