I. INTRODUCTION
As the title suggests, Joseph Mendola’s latest book, Anti-Externalism is a challenge to a broad thesis that currently enjoys some popularity in philosophy of mind and language: semantic externalism. According to externalists, some of our thoughts are constituted by people, things, or events outside of our heads. For example, my thoughts about “water” are in fact about a particular kind of substance - H_2O -- regardless of what I know (or think I know, or fail to know) about the stuff I call “water.” It seems that the referent of my “water”-thoughts is determined, in part, by chemical goings-on that are external to me -- hence, externalism. Put me, just as I am, in a world where all the stuff in lakes and rivers and faucets is not H_2O but another substance -- XYZ -- and (some have claimed) all my same “water”-thoughts would then refer to XYZ. This change in reference, it is claimed, is best explained by positing a change in environment-dependent thought-contents.

The foregoing is a loose paraphrase of one well-known argument for the externalist’s conclusion. Mendola’s preliminary project is negative, and consists in undermining this and other arguments put forth in favor of externalism. His positive proposal, however, consists in providing an alternative account of thought contents that is entirely internalist. According to internalism, the contents of one’s thoughts are entirely constituted by what goes on from the skin in. Take me as I am and put me in an XYZ-filled world, and the content of my “water”-thoughts remains the same.

The dialectical situation Mendola places himself in is a difficult one. For externalists have typically adopted an ecumenical approach, claiming that there is “narrow content” that is internally constituted, plus “broad content” that, they feel forced to admit, is constituted by things outside the head. Such a “soft” externalist would grant that there is a kind of mental content -- narrow content -- that ‘stays the same’ when I am in an XYZ-world. But, she would hasten to add, there is also a kind of mental content that differs -- broad content. This means that a new form of internalism alone won’t be enough to secure Mendola’s conclusion. He needs to convince us that we can rightly do away with externalism altogether, in its many guises. Or equivalently, he needs to convince us that we do not need broad mental content.

To accomplish this, Mendola undertakes a wide-ranging survey of relevant topics and debates in philosophy of mind and language. The book is roughly divided into three Parts (each containing three chapters) on this basis. In what follows, I provide a brief and thematic synopsis of each Part’s argumentative role. Only a few novel and distinctive features of Mendola’s internalist view -- which he elaborates fairly concisely in the 300-page text under review -- will be considered in detail thereafter.

II. SYNOPSIS
Part I begins with an analysis of what Mendola calls “case-based arguments” for externalism: hypothetical scenarios that have been alleged to adduce intuitive support for externalism. These include Kripke’s (1980) water- H_2O case (sketched above) among others, as well as related thought experiments due to Putnam (1975) and Burge...
Part II, entitled "Mind-Based Externalism," considers a cluster of "theoretical arguments" rooted in the philosophy of mind that might be put forth in favor of externalism. This section focuses on mental representations that are not plausibly linguistically-mediated: for example, color perceptions and bodily sensations. The purpose here is to suggest that leading externalist theories are susceptible to surges of mental content -- Fodor's (1987, 1990) asymmetric dependence theory, and the diverse etiological theories of Dretske (1998, 1995), Millikan (1984, 2004), and Papineau (1994, 1993) -- fail on their own terms, by ascribing the wrong contents to mental states in a range of cases. At best, Mendola suggests, such theories are forced to sacrifice some elements of parsimony and plausibility, to the point where his internalist alternative -- "Qualia Empiricism" -- can do just as well. Again, Mendola's arguments are nuanced and deliberate, but by way of superficial gloss, a fair bit of argumentative burden is shifted by a principle we might call a Plausible Contents Constraint. This is as straightforward as it sounds: Mendola "presume[s] that if [a theory of mental content] is true, then it assigns intuitively plausible contents to mental representations." (p. 150). Again, an internalist account is proposed that is alleged to fare as well as, or better than, these externalist views. In elaborating this account, Mendola appeals to the Strawsonian tradition of Kantianism in phenomenology, providing an extended conception of nonlinguistic mental content. The amount of philosophical terrain covered in this section may be daunting for the uninitiated, and it also leaves Mendola vulnerable to counter-argument from multiple directions.

In Part III, a further collection of "theoretical arguments", this time derived from philosophy of language, are considered. This chapter forms a much-needed argumentative crux for Mendola's account, providing mechanisms which link the basic semantic resources of Qualia Empiricism to the more sophisticated cognitive abilities at work in Part II's RDC. Again, the literature on philosophy of language is scoured for any theories or puzzles that might be deployed in support of externalism. And again, objections are raised that either recommend Mendola's internalist proposal, or place it on equal footing with the externalist views under consideration. The works of Davidson (2001, 2005), Dummett (1981), Grice (1989), Wittgenstein (1968), and Brandom (1994) are some central targets -- each intellectually daunting in their own right. In sum, the cyclical strategy Mendola adopts throughout the text is best characterized as "undermine and incorporate:" undermine externalist arguments as much as possible, and incorporate any remaining insights within an internalist theory of mental content.

III. POINTS OF NOTE

Some will have reservations about Mendola's success in executing the first part of his strategy: undermining externalist arguments. Personally, I found his reading of Dretske's etiological view somewhat idiosyncratic, and I have concerns that it may mislead some readers. With so many views and authors under discussion, Mendola faces such nit-picking in spades. But for a more substantive issue, consider the second stage of Mendola's strategy -- "incorporating" externalist insights into an internalist theory. The term "incorporate" here should be read quite literally. For any mechanisms or structures out there in the world that externalists have claimed partially constitute the content of one's thoughts, Mendola proposes an internalist analogue that exists within one's corporal self. So, for example, another well-known externalist line of thought (due to Burge) has it that the contents of my thoughts can be constituted by the thoughts and linguistic practices of relevant experts. I might sometimes deploy my concepts of "elm" and "beech" interchangeably, yet allow myself to be corrected by botanists should the need arise. Thus my thought contents, it is claimed, are dependent upon those of the experts, and there is a socially-mediated mechanism, external to me, which constitutes those contents. As an internalist analogue of this mechanism, Mendola proposes that there is "some internally fixed dispositional fact about [me]... regarding what corrections I would accept from others." (p. 46).

In retrospect, nearly all of Mendola's incorporations amount to positing some internally-determined disposition or another that can do the work of externalist mechanisms in constituting content. In addition to the foregoing, Mendola draws attention to four dispositions: "to speak" (p. 43), "to respond" more generally (p. 485; 250), "to consider things the reference of certain terms in various hypothetical scenarios" (p. 87), "to react to sentences" (p. 310), and "to utter mathematical sentences and to use them in proofs" (p. 318), among others. Also implied throughout the text is taxonomy of different kinds of dispositions including "deviant dispositions" (p. 89), "momentarily-determinate dispositions" (ibid.), "dissonant dispositions." (p. 251), "dominant" and "conflicting" dispositions (p. 287). Such dispositions are of crucial importance to Mendola's view: determinate mental content exists only where relevant dispositions are themselves sufficiently determinate.

As such, one of the crucial oversights in the work under review is that Mendola does not explicitly adopt -- even for expository purposes -- a particular internalist-friendly conception of dispositions that can assurely cover all these cases. This is not just a point on which friends of externalism may seize in responding to Mendola's arguments, it is a point that renders his own view incomplete. Using the language of
dispositions, Mendola has suggested a series of translation schemes between externalist views and internalist analogues. This strategy is an interesting development in the internalist/externalist debate, but assessing its import will require further attention to the metaphysics of dispositions themselves.

Despite this, Mendola's internalist theory -- "Qualia Empiricism" -- is ingenious, and even its general shape is enough to warrant recognition. Traditionally, empiricism in the philosophy of mind has been a mixed bag, simultaneously a semantic and an epistemic thesis. Consider the seminal work of empiricist David Hume, who held that mental states could be divided roughly into two kinds: impressions and ideas. Some relevant examples of impressions would be bodily sensations, as well as perceptions in various modalities. On Hume's account, ideas, or thought-contents, were copies of impressions one had previously experienced. In other words, the contents of thoughts were identical to the contents of prior experience, and the latter contents came first. In the first half of the 20th century, these same conscious states were often referred to in terms that made perspicuous their alleged epistemic import: e.g., as 'sensory givens', or 'sense-data'. On this view, popularized by members of the Vienna Circle, sensory contents were not only the basis for all meaningful thought content, they were also the ultimate source of epistemic currency (justification, or warrant) in one's psychological economy.

On Mendola's view, these epistemological trappings are abandoned. According to Qualia Empiricism, the contents of sensory states are phenomenally-conscious qualia, and these are a basic kind of content in our psychological economy (see esp. Ch.s 7 & 10). But these contents carry with them no great epistemic privilege, and our experiences can mislead us about the nature of the world. Mendola's main example here concerns color vision. In normal color experience, it seems that reddish blue and bluish purple are very similar colors. But Mendola cites evidence which he takes to suggest that "no two colors have more dissimilar objective bases" in items in the world (p. 174). Here, our color experience misleads us about the nature of the world -- but nonetheless serves as the semantic root of our color concepts, according to Mendola.

Notably, Mendola's theory thus fits within the framework that Kriegel & Horgan (forthcoming) call the Phenomenal Intentionality Research Program, or "PIRP" (Kriegel & Horgan, 2009). Very broadly characterized, PIRP is the view that the emergence of mental content in the world is ultimately dependent upon the existence of conscious experience: no intentionality without phenomenology. Externalists come in many entwined varieties-- as Mendola's sweeping overviews attest. But advocates of PIRP are rare, and form less unified subgroups. Anti-Externalism is, so far as I know, one of the only book-length treatments of topics relevant to PIRP which culminates in a detailed and unified philosophical theory of mental content.

IV. SUMMARY

Mendola has done an excellent job of collecting externalist arguments -- both those that explicitly appear as such in the literature, and those that can cleverly be constructed from the resources of extant theories over the course of argument. Mendola deserves our thanks for providing this resource alone. Combined with his unique perspectives, and its novel developments, the text will prove rewarding to any reader who has an interest in the internalist/externalist debate. Intellectual returns will increase exponentially for those with a strong background in philosophy of mind and language, and those who are willing to re-read this thoughtful text in its entirety. The issues raised in Anti-Externalism will merit careful attention for a long time to come.

References


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