ABSTRACT. Content externalism is the dominant view in the philosophy of mind. Content essentialism, the thesis that thought tokens have their contents essentially, is also popular. And many externalists are supporters of such essentialism. However, endorsing the conjunction of those views either (i) commits one to a counterintuitive view of the underlying physical nature of thought tokens or (ii) commits one to a slightly different but still counterintuitive view of the relation of thought tokens to physical tokens as well as a rejection of realist physicalism. In this essay I reveal the problem and articulate and adjudicate among the possible solutions. I will end up rejecting content essentialism.

Physicalism for our actual thought particulars is almost universally agreed to be true. Many theorists admit that non-physical properties and particulars are possible; property dualists think that there are properties that are actually non-physical in some sense; and there are a few qualia enthusiasts who hold that there are non-physical qualia tokens. But when it comes to actual thought particulars, virtually everyone outside of the camp of theists toes the physicalist line. There may be ghosts, gods, and goblins everywhere, but with respect to human thought tokens, we are physicalists.

Given this generally sanctioned physicalist view, the widespread acceptance of content externalism – the thesis that some of us could have had distinct non-indexical, de dicto ascribed belief contents without any difference or distinction in our internal physical makeup throughout any part of our life – is surprising. For Tyler Burge (1979, 1992, 1993) has argued that externalism calls out for the actual existence of non-physical propositional attitude particulars – given, that is, the truth of content essentialism, the thesis that thought tokens have their
contents necessarily. This latter thesis is widely endorsed in the philosophy of mind, by such leaders as Burge of course and Jerry Fodor (1990). But despite the thousands of pages devoted to investigating externalism, almost everyone has overlooked the presumptive incompatibility among the three popular theses, externalism, content essentialism, and physicalism for actual thought tokens. Very roughly, the problem is this. Suppose that you actually have a belief token (temporal particular) B with water content (e.g., the content that water is clear). If physicalism is true, then B = P, where P is some physical particular. In the counterfactual water world you are physically identical to how you are in the actual world. So you have P there. Since B = P, you have B there. If content essentialism is true, then in that water world B has the water content. But according to externalism it doesn’t have that content. Contradiction. The problem is more complicated than what is suggested by that argument, but the upshot will be the following:

Endorsing the conjunction of externalism and content essentialism either (i) commits one to a counterintuitive view of the underlying physical nature of thought tokens or (ii) commits one to a slightly different but still counterintuitive view of the relation of thought tokens to physical tokens as well as a rejection of realist physicalism.

What these two counterintuitive views are will be addressed below. Burge is committed to (ii), the rejection of physicalism. However, I will argue in part that this dualist response is insufficiently motivated, since (i) is more attractive than (ii). Be that as it may, the primary question investigated in this essay is, ‘What should an externalist say about content essentialism?’ My purpose is to reveal the philosophical problem, work out the contending positions, derive their strengths and weaknesses, and offer a more direct evaluation of content essentialism. I will be advocating its rejection.

1. THE TENSION AMONG PHYSICALISM, EXTERNALISM, AND CONTENT ESSENTIALISM

Suppose that in the actual world Alf has a friend who concludes that walleye get bigger than sauger, these being two