

What anti-individualists cannot know a priori

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Anti-individualism and privileged self-knowledge may be incompatible if the attempt to hold both has the absurd consequence that one could know a priori propositions that are knowable only empirically. This would be so if such an attempt entailed that one could know a priori both the contents of one's own thoughts and the anti-individualistic entailments from those thought-contents to the world. For then one could also come to know a priori (by simple deduction) the empirical conditions entailed by one's thoughts. But I shall argue that there is no construal of 'a priori knowledge' that could be used to raise an incompatibilist objection of this sort.

Note first that knowledge of one's own thought-contents would not count as a priori according to the usual criteria for knowledge of this kind.¹ Surely, then, incompatibilists are using this term to refer to some other, stipulatively defined, epistemic property. But could this be, as suggested by McKinsey (1991: 9), the property of being knowable 'just by thinking' or

¹I take the rationalist, Kantian and empiricist criteria of aprioricity to be, respectively, knowledge attainable by reason alone, knowledge independent of all experience (where propositions about the contents of one's own mental states are empirical propositions of inner sense), and knowledge of conceptual, logical, or mathematical truths.

'from the armchair'? Certainly not if these were metaphors for knowledge attainable on the basis of reason alone, since self-knowledge would fail to come out a priori in this sense. And exactly the same would happen if the property were that of being knowable by inference, since, according to a common intuition, self-knowledge is noninferential.

But suppose 'a priori' were defined as the property of being knowable without experience² -- where 'experience' is construed narrowly in order to get knowledge of the contents of one's thoughts to come out as nonempirical.³ Since incompatibilists would now be departing from standard construals, we might ask: How, given anti-individualism and privileged self-knowledge, could a person (say, Oscar) know nonempirically both the anti-individualistic entailments from his thought-contents to the world, and his thought-contents?

²This has a number of different uses, and seems more suitable for the problem incompatibilists wish to raise -- viz., that of someone's being able to know that water exists from premisses knowable entirely by introspection or by philosophical argument. McKinsey (1991: 9), for instance, defines 'a priori' as knowledge attainable without 'launching an empirical investigation or making any assumptions about the empirical world', and Boghossian (1997: 161 and ff.) uses 'knowable a priori' and 'knowable without the benefit of empirical investigation' interchangeably.

³Note that Burge (1995: 272) is committed to such a construal of experience, for he takes a justification to be a priori or nonempirical '... if its justificational force is in no way constituted or enhanced by reference to or reliance on the specifics of some range of sense experiences or perceptual beliefs'.

Arguably, beliefs about such entailments are attainable by thought experiments (philosophical arguments, etc.), and beliefs about one's own thought-contents, by a process we may call 'introspection'. But if this is what incompatibilists mean by 'nonempirical', their intended reductio of anti-individualism and privileged self-knowledge would, of course, be an equivocation.⁴ Yet there would be no equivocation if 'a priori' were defined as the disjunctive property of being knowable either by thought experiments or by introspection. For then each disjunct would be a type of knowledge attainable without empirical investigation, and when predicated of the premisses of Oscar's reasoning, they would each come out true because a different disjunct obtains. But such a property would make the incompatibilist argument invalid, since there is no plausible closure principle allowing the transmission of epistemic status from premisses to conclusion. For imagine that I first introduce a stipulatively defined epistemic property, say

'a priori+'= knowable either conceptually or directly.

I claim then to know a priori+ that if I am seeing only a tree, then I am not seeing a horse, for this is available to me

⁴Miller (1997) has recently held that incompatibilists are equivocating, but as shown here, their argument could be construed in a way that avoids that fallacy.

conceptually. Furthermore, being a direct realist, I claim to know a priori+ that I am seeing only a tree, for this is available to me **directly.** (Note that each premiss comes out a priori+ because a different disjunct of my stipulated property obtains.) However, I cannot claim to know a priori+ that I am not seeing a horse, since this conclusion is not available to me either conceptually or directly, but **inferentially.** Thus closure fails here. But, in exactly the same way, it fails in Oscar's argument, when the property of being knowable without empirical investigation is cashed out as the disjunctive property of being knowable either by thought experiment or by introspection.

To avoid a failure of closure, incompatibilists might now attempt to construe 'a priori' as the property of being knowable either by thought experiments, introspection, or inference. Yet this construal is unavailable to them, and it would generate no problem for anti-individualism. For note, first, what is entailed by the incompatibilists' claim that Oscar could come to know anti-individualism by running standard thought experiments: If this were so, then Oscar could know anti-individualism only empirically, since to run his experiments some empirical beliefs, as well as nondeductive inference, must be available to him. He must have at least some empirical beliefs, because he needs to specify the relevant background conditions against which he is to test whether content supervenes locally. And,

naturally, providing adequate descriptions of the relevant states of affairs in the actual and possible worlds requires empirical beliefs concerning molecule-per-molecule replicas, planets, natural kinds, etc.⁵

On the other hand, suppose that Oscar has adequately set out a twin-earth case. Would he then be in a position to conclude, by straightforward deduction, that content does not supervene locally? Surely not, since he would then be confronted by contradictory intuitions, neither of which is entailed by the data the imagined state of affairs makes available.⁶ For from those data, Oscar could conclude, with the individualist, that when he and his twin sincerely utter 'Water is wet', their thoughts have the same content (that is, that content supervenes locally) or, with the anti-individualist, that they do not. How, then, does the anti-individualist use the thought experiments to reach his conclusion? He sets out a case, reflects upon actual (observed) ascriptions of meaning and content, compares competing explanations of these ordinary practices, and finally

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Otherwise, how could Oscar work out the *ceteris paribus* conditions relevant to the phenomenon he wishes to test? See K. Wilkes (1988).

⁶The anti-individualist conclusion does not, of course, follow from a twin-earth or an 'arthritis' case, unless some assumptions -- concerning, for instance, conditions for sameness and difference in content, and indexicality -- are made. See B. Loar (1988), and E. Sosa (1993).

suggests that the hypothesis that best explains the imagined state of affairs is that content does not supervene locally.⁷ It follows that if Oscar is to learn anti-individualism by running twin-earth cases, some empirical beliefs and nondeductive inference must be available to him.

Once we acknowledge that standard anti-individualist thought experiments require both background empirical beliefs and inference, then what incompatibilists imagine to be a reductio is in fact only that a person could come to know empirical propositions by deductive and nondeductive inference from the contents of his mind: his perceptual, sensory and doxastic states, to which he has privileged access.

Yet this seems very plausible and consistent with many empiricist attempts to explain knowledge of empirical propositions. Don't sense-datum theorists (both indirect realists and phenomenologists)⁸ explain it by invoking knowledge of our mental states and inference? And aren't those theorists **empiricists**? Note that, if we cash out the incompatibilists' 'a priori' as the property of being knowable either by thought

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Oscar could say that, ordinarily, we invoke that-clauses to identify propositional-attitude content, take difference in their truth-conditions to be sufficient for difference in their content, do not ascribe false beliefs to others unless we have good reasons for it, etc. Note that his claims supporting anti-individualism would then be empirical claims.

⁸For instance, G.E. Moore and C.I. Lewis.

experiments, introspection, or inference, then sense-datum theories would have to be construed as claiming that we have 'a priori' knowledge of empirical propositions. But now, surely, something has gone wrong with the stipulation!

It appears, then, that the anti-individualist is in the clear: for of the various possible ways of construing 'a priori' in the incompatibilist argument, it is now plain that each generates a problem for the proposed reductio.⁹

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⁹Thanks to Jonathan Adler, Brian Loar, Stephen Schiffer, Gary Seay, and Ernest Sosa for criticisms on an earlier draft, and to Umit Yalcin for helpful discussions of these matters.

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