

*Anti-Individualism and Knowledge*

Jessica Brown

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During the last decade Jessica Brown has been one of the main participants in the on-going debate over the compatibility of anti-individualism and self-knowledge. It is therefore of great interest that she is now publishing a book examining the various epistemological consequences of anti-individualism. The book is divided into three sections. The first discusses the question of whether a subject can have privileged access to her own thoughts, even if the content of her thoughts is construed anti-individualistically. This section contains a detailed and useful discussion not only of how we are to understand privileged access, but also of epistemological issues of more general import, such as the connection between knowledge and reliability. The second section focuses on various aspects of the problem of anti-individualism and reasoning, including an extensive discussion of the relation between anti-individualism and a Fregean account of content. The final section discusses the so-called *reductio* argument against compatibilism (i.e. the view that anti-individualism is compatible with a priori knowledge of one's own thoughts), according to which compatibilism implies that we can have a priori knowledge of certain facts about the world that, intuitively, are not knowable that way.

The book is very clearly written and structured. Readers unfamiliar with the debate will get a good sense of its broad contours and the various positions taken. Brown starts out by distinguishing different forms of anti-individualism. This is very helpful since it is quite clear that the term has come to be rather carelessly used, as if it referred to one particular thesis, whereas in fact a number of loosely related positions are labeled 'anti-individualist'. At the outset she distinguishes three familiar anti-individualist theses: natural kind anti-individualism, social anti-individualism, and singular anti-individualism. These

theses all concern the individuation of thought content: They tell us that a subject's thoughts are partly individuated by certain environmental factors (natural kinds, community practice, and specific objects, respectively). But Brown also makes two further, and more innovative, distinctions: First, she distinguishes between Fregean and non-Fregean anti-individualism, following the suggestion by McDowell and Evans that it is possible to combine anti-individualism with the Fregean idea that a difference in rational dubitability implies a difference in sense. Second, she distinguishes anti-individualist theories that accept the possibility of illusions of thought from theories that do not, but rather propose some kind of descriptive account in the case of reference failure.

One could argue with Brown's categorizations. For instance, Burge (since 1986) subscribes to a form of anti-individualism that is not social, but that is supposed to apply to all types of kinds (such as sofas) and not just to natural kinds. This form of anti-individualism does not fit any of Brown's categories and it would have been interesting to know what she makes of Burge's suggestion. I would also have liked to see Brown stress the difference between anti-individualism based on the notion of object-dependence, and anti-individualism based on Twin Earth-type considerations. The former has its roots in a purely referential semantics for singular terms. The latter, by contrast, is based on certain ideas concerning meaning individuation of general terms and does not in itself imply object-dependence. Indeed, it is far from clear how to translate the notion of object-dependence to the case of general terms, and what would motivate such a move.

One reason Brown does not sharply distinguish these two types of anti-individualism, is that she appears to endorse yet another form of anti-individualism, one that might be labeled 'acquisition anti-individualism' (see for instance Brown p. 276.). This is the thesis that acquiring concept C (*water*, say) requires a certain environment (such as an environment where there is water and/or experts). Acquisition anti-individualism is akin to

object-dependence anti-individualism in that it appears to imply that one cannot think thoughts containing concept C, unless a certain environmental setting is in place. At the same time, however, it should be clear that acquisition anti-individualism is not in itself a *semantic* thesis. After all, one can hold that certain external conditions are required if a subject is to acquire the concept of water, without thereby being committed to any particular semantics (one might wish, for instance, to combine these acquisition considerations with a purely descriptivist semantics). It is therefore unclear how acquisition considerations fit into the picture of anti-individualism as a thesis about meaning and content (an unclarity that goes back to Tyler Burge's 'Other bodies', 1982, in *Thought and Object*, ed. A. Woodfield).

To someone familiar with Brown's earlier papers, however, the most striking fact about the book is her change of mind: She used to employ a version of the reductio argument to support incompatibilism. Now, however, she defends compatibilism; she used to argue that anti-individualism fails to give a plausible account of reasoning, but now she argues that this is not the case. Since it is always of interest when a philosopher makes a hundred and eighty degree turn, let us examine her reasons for this 'conversion'.

First, let us consider anti-individualism and reasoning. In her paper 'Critical Reasoning, Understanding and Self-Knowledge' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 61, 2000), Brown argues that there is a tension between the anti-individualist idea that we can think with concepts we understand incompletely and a plausible view of critical reasoning. If a subject is to be able to critically evaluate her own reasoning she must be able to judge the rational relations among her thoughts. However, Brown argues, a subject who radically misunderstands her own concepts will not be in a position to do this. For instance, she may make incorrect inferences (taking p to constitute evidence for q when it does not, and vice versa) and no amount of critical reflection would help the individual to discover her error. In the book this worry has completely disappeared. Brown acknowledges that anti-

individualism implies ascribing simple (first-order) errors of reasoning to individuals, but she argues that this is not at all worrisome, and the question of critical reasoning does not even arise. Indeed, Brown argues, the belief that anti-individualism threatens our ordinary conception of rationality is based on a failure to separate two distinct abilities: “the ability to grasp a priori that thoughts specified as having a certain form have certain logical properties, and the ability to grasp a priori of what form one’s thoughts are.” (p. 184) For instance, someone may be able to recognize a certain argument form, such as modus ponens, without being able to determine whether certain of her own thoughts instantiate this form. Thus, the individual who has an incomplete understanding of her own thoughts will not be able to determine, a priori, what their specific logical relations are, but she may still be perfectly rational in the sense that her ability to detect different argument forms is intact. Hence, anti-individualism does not undermine the assumption that individuals are by and large rational.

There are several problems with this proposal, however. First, although the distinction between the two abilities may be perfectly legitimate, it should be clear that it is of little help when it comes to making sense of an individual’s reasoning and actions. After all, when it comes to such rationalizations, it is clearly the ability to grasp the form of one’s actual thoughts that is relevant. If, therefore, anti-individualism poses a threat to this ability, it does not help to be told that it does not pose a threat to the ability to detect abstract argument forms. Second, by focusing on the threat posed by anti-individualism to logical reasoning, Brown appears to forget her own insights in the 2000 paper. As Brown stresses there, the threat posed by anti-individualism concerns not merely the individual’s ability to detect the *logical* relations among her thoughts, but also her ability to detect other rational relations, such as conceptual and justificatory ones. This problem would retain its force, even if one were convinced by what Brown says in the case of logical reasoning, and it is surprising that Brown does not even address it.

Next, the reductio argument, where Brown explicitly acknowledges that her discussion ‘represents a change of mind’ (p. 274). In ‘The Incompatibility of Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access’ (*Analysis*, 55, 1995), Brown argues that Burge’s version of anti-individualism falls prey to the reductio since Burge is committed to the thesis that having a natural kind concept requires either the presence of the natural kind in question, or the presence of other ‘expert’ people (assuming the individual to be a non-expert). Brown suggests that if this philosophical thesis can be known a priori and it is assumed that x can know a priori that she thinks a thought containing a given natural kind concept, such as *water*, then x is in a position to infer, purely a priori, that either water or other people exist. Hence the reductio. Brown now believes that this argument fails. This is so, she argues, since the individual cannot be assumed to know a priori that she has a concept that names a natural kind. In general, Brown writes, “it is an empirical matter whether a term intended to name a natural kind in fact does so.” (p. 277). For instance, it may turn out that ‘water’ names a motley of natural kinds, or none at all. Brown labels these situations ‘bad scenarios’. If it cannot be known a priori that one is not in a bad scenario, then it cannot be known a priori that one’s concept is a natural kind concept, and the reductio fails to go through.

Now, this way out of the reductio has been proposed before, for instance by Brian McLaughlin and Michael Tye ( in *Knowing Our Own Minds*, Clarendon 1998). The question is why Brown suddenly finds it so attractive. Of course, it is indisputable that we cannot know a priori that we are not in a ‘bad scenario’. What is far from trivial, however, is the suggestion that the supporter of anti-individualism can accommodate this fact in a plausible way. That is, assuming that the reductio can be escaped by appealing to the idea that we cannot know a priori that we are not in a bad scenario, the question is whether the anti-individualist is able to give a plausible account of these scenarios. Brown proposes two possible options for the anti-individualist, mentioned above: The illusion view and the

descriptive view (although, unfortunately, she does not let us know which position she favors). According to the illusion view, if *x* is in a bad scenario, she suffers an illusion of thought: It merely appears to her that she is thinking that water is wet, for instance. This view is naturally associated with versions of object-dependence anti-individualism. According to the descriptive view, by contrast, in the bad scenario *x* simply has a descriptive concept (the view typically associated with Twin Earth anti-individualism). However, both of these views are very unattractive.

Consider the illusion view. There are two serious difficulties here. First, there is the very basic difficulty of how we are to characterize such illusions. Obviously, we cannot describe *x*'s illusion by saying that she merely *thought* that she was thinking the thought that *water is wet*. Since there is no such first-order thought, there is no such second-order thought either. My hunch is that a consistent supporter of anti-individualism would need to say that such illusions cannot be characterized as mistaken beliefs (as in the case of perceptual illusions), but must be construed as a failure to think a thought at all. This appears to be Brown's view, since she suggests that in this situation there is doubt that *x* 'in essaying a thought ... manages to have a thought at all' (p. 131). But that, of course, makes the talk of 'illusion' misleading, and it renders the question of how we are to rationalize the agent's reasoning and actions rather urgent (the individual, after all, certainly appears to think that she has a certain thought). Second, whatever one might think of adopting the illusion view in the case of singular terms, it ought to appear very problematic in the case of general terms. Consider, for instance, the case where it is discovered that a purported natural kind term, such as 'jade', has been applied to a motley of natural kinds (it is worth stressing that this is not a far-fetched case, but commonplace). It seems wildly implausible to say that in such a scenario, it has been discovered that (since old times) we have not been thinking any 'jade'-thoughts at all, but merely been under the illusion that we have had such thoughts.

What, then, about the descriptive view? This has an advantage over the illusion view in that it does not imply that in a bad scenario our discourse lacks content. However, it has the disadvantage of rendering the semantic status of the terms in question entirely a posteriori. On this view, whether ‘water’ is to be given an anti-individualist semantics or a descriptive one depends on whether ‘water’ happens to pick out one underlying microstructural property, rather than a motley. This is a rather troubling consequence. Not only is it mysterious how the chemical make-up of the world could have semantic consequences of this sort, but it would also seem to imply that the a priori grasp we have of our own concepts is a lot more shaky than we could have dreamt of. For instance, if we cannot know a priori whether our concepts are descriptive or not, we cannot know a priori what their conceptual connections are. Whether the descriptions associated with the term in question are constitutive of the concept, or mere reference fixers cannot be decided prior to empirical investigations.

Both the illusion view and the descriptive view, therefore, face serious difficulties. Hence, even if the reductio can be avoided by adopting the strategy Brown suggests the question is whether this avoidance comes at too high a price. Moreover, the very fact that both of these views are problematic throws doubt on the cogency of anti-individualism quite independently of the compatibilism debate. (I discuss this further in ‘Naming Natural Kinds’, forthcoming *Synthese*, May 2005). Of course, the objective of Brown’s book is not to argue for anti-individualism per se, but to explore its epistemological consequences. Nonetheless, it would have been nice to know exactly what version of anti-individualism she endorses, and why.

Lest the reader should be misled by the forgoing comments, it should be stressed that Brown’s book is an important and very useful contribution to the literature, one which moves the ball forward on several important fronts. It is the first book-long effort to

bring together the various strands (epistemological as well as semantic) of the by now very complex debate over anti-individualism, and it will certainly repay a careful reading, both by novices and seasoned veterans of the debate.

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