

On our alleged a priori knowledge that water exists

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Certain McKinsey-style arguments against anti-individualism are seen to fail, for making an illicit assumption. They assume that the metaphysical dependency that holds between the availability of a given concept and the external conditions required for individuating that concept are discernible a priori. But the proponent of anti-individualism should say that this dependency is no more discernible a priori than is the truth of 'Water = H₂O'.

Anti-individualism ('AI') is the thesis that at least some propositional attitudes depend for their individuation on (social or physical) facts that do not supervene on the internal states of the subject. McKinsey-style arguments against AI purport to establish that AI has unacceptably strong anti-sceptical implications. The crux of such arguments is as follows: given

some thinker *S* who is thinking a thought involving a concept which (according to AI) depends for its individuation on conditions that do not supervene on *S*'s internal states, this fact, together with AI and a thinker's authoritative self-knowledge of her thoughts, entail that *S* can have a priori knowledge of some fact *f*, where *f* would appear to intuition to be only knowable a posteriori. Here I argue that McKinsey-style arguments can be met by revealing as objectionable a key assumption. I will focus on the version found e.g. in Boghossian 1998, on which *f* = the fact that water has existed at some time. Admittedly, a good many McKinsey-style arguments seek to derive a weaker, disjunctive claim – a claim such as that either water exists and I have been in contact with it, or else I have been in contact with a linguistic community (see e.g. Brown 1995). I will not comment on how the present argument affects those versions, though I suspect that a modification of the argument to be presented here could be brought to bear against them as well. It would be surprising if this were not so: the present argument focuses on the role played by the notion of 'metaphysical dependence' in the non-disjunctive version of McKinsey's argument, and that notion appears to play as central a role in the disjunctive versions as it does in the non-disjunctive version; but I will have to leave this point for another time.

Let us designate as an 'anti-individualistic concept' any concept *C* that is such that, for any speaker *S* who might possess *C*, the individuation of *C* depends on the existence of object or property *E*, where *E*'s existence is a fact that does not supervene on *S*'s internal states. McKinsey-style arguments then proceed as follows. For any anti-individualistic concept *C* figuring in a thought that *p*, where *E* is the external object or property on whose existence the individuation of *C* depends, there is an entailment of (2) by (1):

- (1) *S* is thinking that *p*
- (2) *E* exists.

This entailment reflects the metaphysical dependency that, according to AI, holds between the state of affairs represented in (1) and that represented in (2): the state of affairs of *S*'s thinking that *p* metaphysically depends on the existence of *E*, in the sense that, if *E* did not exist, then concept *C* (which is individuated in terms of *E*) would not be available to figure (as it does) in the thought that *p*. Thus any state of affairs involving a thinking-that-*p* metaphysically depends upon the existence of *E*. Since compatibilist-minded anti-individualists concede that any *S* who is thinking that *p* is in a position to know a priori that she herself is thinking that *p*, and since (as we just saw) such a state metaphysically depends upon *E*'s existence, it follows that any *S* who is thinking that *p* is in a position to know a priori that *E* exists.

Or so proponents of the McKinsey-style argument would have us believe. The trouble in the move from (1) to (2) is that it depends on empirical information. This can be brought out by reference to a parallel with the case of water and H_2O . It is familiar since Kripke to hold that, though ‘Water is H_2O ’ is (if true) necessarily true, its truth-value cannot be known a priori. Similarly I want to suggest that, where ‘WATER’ is the name of the concept expressed by the English word-form ‘water’, though ‘WATER metaphysically depends (for its individuation) on the existence of water’ is (if true) necessarily true, its truth-value cannot be known a priori.¹

The parallel can be developed as follows. First consider the relation between water and H_2O . We identify water, as a type of liquid, by its superficial properties (wetness, transparency, flowing out of taps and in rivers etc.). Subsequent scientific investigation yields that the liquid in question is H_2O . Move now to the relation between WATER and the existence of water. We identify a concept by self-ascriptively thinking a thought involving that concept: we think to ourselves, ‘I am thinking: water quenches thirst’. The concept corresponding to our use of ‘water’ is determined by semantic intentions available to us a priori: with ‘water’ I intend to express the natural kind concept true of the wet, transparent liquid flowing out of taps and in rivers etc. Subsequent investigation reveals that the concept in question, WATER, depends for its individuation on the existence of water (= H_2O). Only in this case, the subsequent investigation is linguistic as well as scientific: the speaker’s intentions determine that her use of ‘water’ aims to express a natural kind concept; anti-individualistic theoretical semantics tells us that natural kind concepts are individuated by appeal to the nature of the kind of stuff to which the relevant word is typically and paradigmatically applied; and science fills in the picture regarding the nature of the relevant kind of stuff. The result is that, though WATER metaphysically (individually) depends on the existence of water, this dependence is no more knowable a priori than is the identification ‘water = H_2O ’. Precisely not, since the metaphysical dependence of WATER on the existence of water (H_2O) itself *depends on* the identification of water with H_2O .

The upshot is that McKinsey-style arguments, which would have us conclude (given anti-individualism, first-person authority, and my self-

¹ One might object: WATER does not metaphysically depend (for its individuation) on the existence of water. After all, a theorist could have theorized the existence of H_2O , and in this way come to have the concept of WATER, even in a world in which there was no water. But it is to be borne in mind that, in assuming that WATER does metaphysically depend (for its individuation) on the existence of water, I am being *concessive* to the proponent of the McKinsey-style argument. I am arguing that, even if WATER does so depend (and so even if we waive the objection to McKinsey 1991 that gave rise to the version in Brown 1995), the McKinsey-style argument *still* fails.

ascriptively thinking a water-thought) that I can know a priori that e.g. water exists, fail, for assuming that all statements expressing metaphysical dependencies between their designata are knowable a priori.²

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² I have benefited greatly from Ben Cordry's dissertation, 'Reference and Reality' (University of Kentucky, 2002).