

*We can't know a priori that H₂O exists.
But can we know that water does?*

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Goldberg (2003) defends externalism from a leading objection, advanced by McKinsey (1991), Brown (1995), and Boghossian (1998). The objection charges that if our having certain thoughts necessarily depended on the presence of certain natural kinds in our environment, as externalists maintain, then we could know, through introspection and a priori reflection, that those kinds are present. This objection is usually expressed as the claim that externalism implies that such environmental facts are a priori.¹ While Goldberg's challenge blocks one version of this objection, it does not directly block his stated target, Boghossian's version. And the attempt to use Goldberg's approach against Boghossian's version faces considerable difficulties.

1. Goldberg's challenge

The externalist holds that some thought contents involve wide concepts, that is, concepts the possession of which necessarily depends on the existence of some external object. Consider a propositional thought content *p* involving the wide concept *C*, where the possession of *C* necessarily depends on the existence of an external object *E*. The McKinsey-style objection to externalism charges that, if externalism were true, then the following type of inference would be a priori.

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

(Goldberg 2003: 39)

It is generally accepted that externalism is plausible only if it is compatible with privileged access; hence, nearly all externalists claim that (1) is introspectively knowable (for *S*). The McKinsey-style objector argues that, since

¹ I follow this standard practice here, though on at least some principled ways of drawing the a priori/a posteriori distinction, the type of justification that introspection provides is a posteriori. Those who share this concern should read 'a priori' throughout this paper as 'available to a priori reflection combined with introspection'. This construal preserves the central worry, that externalism implies that we can determine particular features of the environment without investigating the environment.

the truth of (1) necessarily depends on the truth of (2), (2) can be inferred a priori from (1).

Goldberg challenges this objection by claiming that the truth of (1) depends on the truth of (2) with only *metaphysical* necessity; since metaphysical necessity is not a priori, he reasons, the inference from (1) to (2) is not a priori. In his example, *p* is the propositional thought content expressed by 'water quenches thirst', *C* is the concept WATER, and *E* is water itself (H₂O).

- (1') I am thinking that water quenches thirst
 (2') H₂O exists.

The externalist claims that one's possessing the concept WATER depends, with metaphysical necessity, on the existence of H₂O. As Goldberg rightly points out, the link between WATER and H₂O rests on an a posteriori identity, 'water = H₂O', and is therefore a posteriori. Since the inference from (1') to (2') requires knowledge of this a posteriori link, the inference is not a priori. I agree with Goldberg's analysis of this example.

2. *The scope of Goldberg's challenge*

Goldberg contends that every McKinsey-style objection can be similarly blocked, since each one commits the error he identifies in the 'H₂O' case, viz.: 'assuming that all statements expressing metaphysical dependencies between their designata are knowable a priori' (41). I think that Goldberg has overestimated the impact of his challenge. For as he himself points out, even if it is a metaphysically necessary truth that water = H₂O, this truth is not a priori. But this means that *a set of premises that failed to provide a priori knowledge (de dicto) that H₂O exists might, for all that, provide a priori knowledge (de dicto) that water exists*. So Goldberg's challenge does not block Boghossian's version, which – modified from Boghossian (1998: 275) – is this:

- (1'') I have the concept WATER
 (2'') Water exists.

Why does Goldberg think that his challenge does block this inference? He says:

[T]hough WATER metaphysically (individually) depends on the existence of water, this dependence is no more knowable a priori than is the identification 'water = H₂O'. Precisely not, since the metaphysical dependence of WATER on the existence of water (H₂O) itself *depends on* the identification of water with H₂O. (40)

The metaphysical dependence of WATER on the existence of H₂O does depend on the fact that water is H₂O. But this doesn't have the consequence

Goldberg attributes to it in the first sentence of this passage. For one could know (*de dicto*) that WATER metaphysically depends on the existence of *water* without knowing (*de dicto*) that WATER metaphysically depends on the existence of H_2O . This is precisely the position of Boghossian's subject, who 'has no specific views about the microstructure of water' (Boghossian 1998: 276). Since the a posteriority of (2') does not entail the a posteriority of (2''), Goldberg's challenge does not block Boghossian's version of the objection.

3. Extending Goldberg's challenge

Even so, Goldberg's challenge does provide a recipe for blocking McKinsey-style objections, namely: show that the concept-object pair used in the objection is, by the externalist's lights, a posteriori. This recipe will defeat any McKinsey-style objection that uses a concept *C* and an object *E* that are linked only a posteriori, as $\langle \text{WATER}, H_2O \rangle$. To use it against Boghossian's version of the objection, an externalist must claim that the link between the 'water' concept that I introspect, and the *de dicto* content *water exists*, is a posteriori. This can be done in one of two ways:

- (A) maintain that $\langle \text{WATER}, \text{water} \rangle$ are linked only a posteriori; or
- (B) deny that I can introspectively identify my concept as WATER, for WATER is, by definition, a genuinely referring natural kind concept.

But both of these options face serious obstacles.

Option (A) is at odds with the methods used to establish externalism. For instance, Kripkean externalism follows from the truth of (roughly) the following conditional, which is established through a priori reflection on possible scenarios, and does not depend on the truth of the (empirical) antecedents.

[(The waterish stuff on Earth has the molecular structure H_2O) & (the waterish stuff on Twin Earth, *twater*, has the structure XYZ)] \rightarrow (*twater* is not water).

On the other hand, Option (B) – the strategy that Goldberg favours² – jeopardizes privileged access. Of course, everyone agrees that *whether one's concept picks out a natural kind* can be determined only through a posteriori means. But it is precisely this fact, together with a commitment

² For he says that 'The speaker's intentions determine that her use of "water" aims to express a natural kind concept' (Goldberg 2003: 40, my emphasis). In personal communication, Goldberg has confirmed that he thinks we can't know, introspectively, whether we possess WATER or, say, TWATER. For a well-developed version of this strategy, see McLaughlin and Tye 1998.

to privileged access, that leads many to reject the externalist view that concepts should be individuated according to whether they *actually* name a natural kind.³ The externalist individuation of concepts implies that even an ideally reflective being cannot introspective identify her concepts.

4. Conclusion

The strength of Goldberg's original challenge derives from the near-unanimity, among philosophers, that scientifically-established identities like 'water = H₂O' are a posteriori. The a posteriority of theoretical semantics, or of the identity of one's own concepts, is much more controversial. So while Goldberg's challenge does reveal a constraint on McKinsey-style objections – they must not mistake the metaphysically necessary for the a priori – showing that all versions of the objection violate this constraint is a more arduous task than Goldberg's discussion would suggest.⁴

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³ For example, Boghossian suggests that the concept is 'something like the clear, tasteless, colourless liquid that flows in the taps and the rivers around here and ...' (Boghossian 1998: 280).

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