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ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM AND PRIVILEGED ACCESS

By MICHAEL MCKINSEY

IT has been a philosophical commonplace, at least since Descartes, to hold that each of us can know the existence and content of his own mental states in a privileged way that is available to no one else. This has at least seemed true with respect to those 'neutral' cognitive attitudes such as thought, belief, intention, and desire, whose propositional contents may be false. The crucial idea is not that one's knowledge of these states in oneself is incorrigible, for surely one can make mistakes about what one believes, intends, or desires. Rather the idea is that we can in principle find out about these states in ourselves 'just by thinking', without launching an empirical investigation or making any assumptions about the external physical world. I will call knowledge obtained independently of empirical investigation *a priori* knowledge. And I will call the principle that it is possible to have *a priori* knowledge of one's own neutral cognitive attitude states, the Principle of Privileged Access, or just 'privileged access' for short.

Although many philosophers would insist that privileged access is undeniable, a series of recent discoveries and arguments in the philosophy of language has, I believe, convinced a perhaps equally large number of philosophers that privileged access is a complete illusion. One of the most persuasive of these arguments was proposed by Tyler Burge [1] as an application of Putnam's [9] famous Twin Earth case. Oscar, a resident of Earth, believes that water is wet. On Twin Earth, there is no water; rather there is a qualitatively similar liquid with a different chemical composition, a liquid that we may call 'twater'. Toscar, who is Oscar's identical twin and a denizen of Twin Earth, does not believe that water is wet. For Toscar has no beliefs about water at all; rather, he believes that twater is wet, that twater fills the oceans, etc. Yet Oscar and Toscar, being absolutely identical twins, would certainly seem to be *internally* the same. In Putnam's terminology, Oscar and

Toscar would share all the same 'narrow' psychological states. Thus, Burge concludes, Oscar's belief that water is wet must be a *wide* state: it must, that is, 'presuppose' or 'depend upon' the relations that Oscar bears to other speakers or objects in his external environment.

In general, Burge endorses a conclusion something like

- (B) Some neutral cognitive states that are ascribed by *de dicto* attitude sentences (e.g., 'Oscar is thinking that water is wet') necessarily depend upon or presuppose the existence of objects external to the person to whom the state is ascribed.

Now (B) might certainly *appear* to conflict with privileged access. For (B) implies that sometimes, whether or not a person is in a given cognitive state is determined by external facts that the person himself could only know by empirical investigation. In such cases, it would seem, the person would therefore not be able to know *a priori* that he is in the cognitive state in question.

But interestingly enough, Burge [2] has recently urged that despite appearances, his anti-individualism (that is, his conclusion (B)) is perfectly compatible with privileged access. And a similar point of view had earlier been expressed by Davidson [3]. I want to argue here that Burge and Davidson are wrong. Anti-individualism and privileged access as standardly understood are incompatible, and something has to give.¹

I will first briefly discuss Davidson's defence of compatibilism. Davidson clearly accepts anti-individualism as formulated by (B), and like Burge he accepts (B) in part on the basis of Burge's persuasive application of Putnam's Twin Earth case. But Davidson insists that anti-individualism does not undermine first person authority about one's own mental states. He agrees with the anti-individualist thesis that some *de dicto* attitude ascriptions 'identify thoughts by relating them to things outside the head' ([3], p. 451). But he suggests that philosophers like Putnam who find a difficulty for privileged access in this thesis are in effect confusing thoughts with their descriptions. Such philosophers make the mistake, Davidson says, of inferring from the fact that a thought is identified or *described* by relating it to something outside the head, that the thought itself must therefore *be* outside the head and hence must be unavailable to privileged access ([3], p. 451).

Now I do not myself see any reason to believe that Putnam or anyone else has actually made this mistake. Certainly, as we shall see below, the most cogent reason for endorsing incompatibilism does not involve this mistake at all, so that Davidson's diagnosis is

¹ I have elsewhere discussed at length the problems for particular forms of anti-individualism that arise from these theses' apparent incompatibility with privileged access. See McKinsey [5] and [7].

inconclusive at best. But what is most disconcerting about Davidson's remarks is the version of privileged access that he apparently takes himself to be defending. He explicitly accepts anti-individualism, understanding it as the thesis that thoughts are often *described* (in attitude ascriptions) by relating them to objects outside the head. Then he (quite correctly) points out that it does not follow from this thesis that the thoughts so described are *themselves* outside the head. But what is the relevance of this point to the issue at hand? Apparently Davidson is saying that since the thoughts in question are inner episodes that exist independently of our means of describing them, we can have privileged access to these episodes, whatever the external implications of our descriptions of the episodes might be.

But if this is what Davidson has in mind, then the version of privileged access that he is defending is too weak to be of much philosophical interest. He wishes to claim, apparently, that one could have privileged access to an episode of thought independently of having privileged access to any particular descriptions that the episode might satisfy. But then what would one have privileged access *to* in such a case? Perhaps one would be privileged to know only that the episode exists; given what Davidson says, there is no reason to suppose that the agent would have privileged access even to the fact that the episode is an episode of *thought*, as opposed to being, say, an episode of indigestion.

But surely, having access of this sort to one's thoughts is not much of a privilege. The traditional view, I should think, is not just that we have privileged access to the fact that our thoughts *occur*; rather the view is that we have privileged access to our thoughts *as satisfying certain descriptions*. In particular, the traditional view is that we have privileged access to our thoughts as having certain contents, or as satisfying certain *de dicto* cognitive attitude predicates. Thus, if Oscar is thinking that water is wet, the traditional view would be that Oscar has privileged access, not just to the fact that some episode or other is occurring in him, but to the fact that he is thinking that water is wet. Now apparently, Davidson would just *deny* that Oscar has privileged access to the latter sort of fact, since as he says, the fact relates Oscar to objects outside his head. But if he would deny this, then Davidson's claim to be defending first person authority seems misleading at best.²

² It is, of course, possible that Davidson would be prepared to defend a view on which all our thoughts that fall under wide *de dicto* descriptions also fall under *other* descriptions of some important kind to which we have privileged access. Perhaps, for instance, he might be willing to say that every thought with a 'wide' content would also have another 'narrow' content to which we have privileged access. (I suggest such a 'two-content' view in my [6].) But as far as I know, Davidson nowhere spells out or defends such a view. And, of course, the mere hypothetical fact that Davidson *might* be willing to develop a view on which privileged access is compatible with anti-individualism does not by itself provide us with any *argument* in favour of this compatibility.

In contrast to Davidson, Burge clearly means to defend privileged access in its traditional guise. Given what he says in 'Individualism and Self-Knowledge' [2], Burge would maintain that the following three propositions are consistent:

- (1) Oscar knows *a priori* that he is thinking that water is wet.
- (2) The proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet necessarily depends upon E.
- (3) The proposition E cannot be known *a priori*, but only by empirical investigation.

(Here I assume that E is the 'external proposition' whose pre-supposition makes Oscar's thought that water is wet a wide state.)

Whether (1)–(3) are consistent is determined by the sense that the phrase 'necessarily depends upon' is taken to have in (2). Unfortunately, Burge never explains or clarifies the concept of necessary dependency that he invokes throughout his paper. I will now argue that Burge is able to make his compatibility thesis appear plausible only by tacitly identifying the dependency relation with *metaphysical* necessity. But this identification is illegitimate in the present context, for a reason that I will explain below.

A clue to what Burge has in mind by dependency is provided by the analogy he chooses to undermine the incompatibilist's reasoning. One who reasons from the assumption that we can know our own mental states *a priori* to the conclusion that these states must be independent of any empirical propositions about physical objects is, says Burge, making the same mistake as was once made by Descartes and diagnosed by Arnaud ([2], pp. 650–1).

From the fact that he could know directly and incorrigibly the existence of himself and his own thoughts, while consistently doubting the existence of his body and the rest of the physical world, Descartes inferred that it was possible for him to exist as a disembodied mind in a nonphysical universe. But this inference is illegitimate. The fact that Descartes could not correctly *deduce* the existence of the physical world from the existence of himself and his thoughts may show something significant about Descartes' *concepts* of himself and his thoughts. But as Arnaud pointed out, this failure of deduction shows nothing about the *nature* of either Descartes or his thoughts. It is perfectly consistent with this failure of deduction to suppose that both Descartes and his thoughts have an essentially physical nature, and that neither Descartes nor his thoughts could possibly have existed unless certain physical objects, including perhaps Descartes' body, Descartes' parents, and the sperm and egg cells from which Descartes developed, had also existed. For the fact, if it is a fact, that Descartes' existence is dependent upon the existence of these other physical objects would not be something that is knowable *a priori*. It would be a fact that is necessary but only knowable *a posteriori*. (As Kripke [4] pointed out.) Thus the dependency would be a fact that is not

deducible *a priori* from Descartes' incorrigible knowledge of himself and his thoughts.

Since metaphysical dependencies are often only knowable *a posteriori*, propositions that are knowable *a priori* might metaphysically depend upon other propositions that are only knowable *a posteriori*. Thus Oscar might know *a priori* that he exists, and his existence might metaphysically depend upon the existence of his mother, even though Oscar cannot know *a priori* that his mother exists.

The upshot of this discussion is that (1), (2), and (3) are all clearly consistent, provided that 'depends upon' in (2) is interpreted as meaning *metaphysical* dependency. When the material conditional 'if *p* then *q*' is metaphysically necessary, let us say that *p* metaphysically entails *q*. Then our result so far is that (1) and (3) are consistent with

(2a) The proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet metaphysically entails E.

Burge's main point in defence of the compatibility of anti-individualism and privileged access, then, seems to be that such triads as (1), (2a) and (3) are consistent. In other words, his point is that our having privileged access to our own mental states is compatible with those states being metaphysically dependent upon facts to which we have no privileged access.

But this point, though correct, is quite irrelevant to the main issue. For anti-individualism is the thesis that some neutral *de dicto* cognitive attitude states are wide states, and to say that a state is wide (not narrow) cannot mean *merely* that the state metaphysically entails the existence of external objects.³ For if it did, then given certain materialistic assumptions that are pretty widely held, it would follow that probably *all* psychological states of *any* kind would be wide, so that the concept of a narrow state would have

³ Here I assume that, for Burge, metaphysical entailment of external objects must be a logically *sufficient* condition for a state to be wide. Perhaps it might be objected that this is unfair to Burge, since all he really needs is the assumption that metaphysical entailment of external objects is a *necessary* condition of wide-ness. But this objection is misconceived. Burge is trying to show that such triads as (1), (2), and (3) are consistent. His argument is that this is so because (1), (2a), and (3) are consistent. But this argument requires the assumption that (2a) – the claim concerning metaphysical entailment – is logically *sufficient* for (2) – the claim concerning wide-ness, or necessary dependency. For unless (2a) is sufficient for (2), the fact that (1), (2a), and (3) are consistent is quite irrelevant to the conclusion that (1), (2), and (3) are consistent. (The correct general principle for proving consistency is that, if *p* and *q* are consistent, and *q* logically implies *r*, then *p* and *r* are consistent. Note the difference between this principle and the false principle that if *p* and *q* are consistent and *q* is logically implied by *r*, then *p* and *r* are consistent: this is wrong, since *r* might for instance be an explicit contradiction that logically implies the consistent *q*.)

no application at all, and anti-individualism would be merely a trivial consequence of (token) materialism.

For instance, it is plausible to suppose that no human could (metaphysically) have existed without biological parents, and that no human could (metaphysically) have had biological parents other than the ones she in fact had. (See Kripke [4], pp. 312–314.) If this is so, then Oscar's thinking that water is wet metaphysically entails that Oscar's mother exists. In fact, Oscar's having *any* psychological property (or any property at all) would metaphysically entail the existence of Oscar's mother. Thus if metaphysical entailment of external objects were what made a psychological state wide, then probably *all* of Oscar's — and everyone else's — psychological states would be wide.

But this is obviously *not* the sense of 'wide psychological state' that philosophers like Putnam and Burge have had in mind. While it may well be true that Oscar's thinking that water is wet entails the existence of Oscar's mother or the existence of the egg from which Oscar developed, it would nevertheless not be for *this* kind of reason that Oscar's mental state is wide! Clearly, to say that the state in question is wide is not to say something that is true by virtue of Oscar's *nature* or the *nature* of the particular event that is Oscar's thought that water is wet. Rather it is to say something about the *concept*, or property, that is expressed by the English predicate 'x is thinking that water is wet'; it is to say something about what it *means* to say that a given person is thinking that water is wet.

Let us say that a proposition *p* *conceptually implies* a proposition *q* if and only if there is a correct deduction of *q* from *p*, a deduction whose only premisses other than *p* are necessary or conceptual truths that are knowable a priori, and each of whose steps follows from previous lines by a self-evident inference rule of some adequate system of natural deduction. I intend the relation of conceptual implication to be an appropriately *logical*, as opposed to a metaphysical, relation.

Our discussion shows, I believe, that the thesis of anti-individualism should be stated in terms of conceptual implication rather than metaphysical entailment.⁴ In this connection, it is worth noting that when Putnam originally introduced the notions of narrow and wide psychological states, he did so in terms of *logical* possibility ([9], p. 141). Moreover, he introduced these notions as explicitly *Cartesian* concepts. Thus a narrow state should be (roughly) a state from which the existence of external objects cannot be *deduced*, and a wide state would be one from which the existence of external objects *can* be deduced.

⁴In McKinsey [8] I give a more thorough and detailed defence of the thesis that the concepts of narrow and wide psychological states must be understood in terms of conceptual implication rather than metaphysical necessity.

On my proposal, Burge's thesis of anti-individualism should be understood as

- (Ba) Some neutral cognitive states that are ascribed by *de dicto* attitude sentences (e.g., 'Oscar is thinking that water is wet') conceptually imply the existence of objects external to the person to whom the state is ascribed.

But, of course, now that we have made anti-individualism into the conceptual thesis that it should be, we also have our contradiction with privileged access back again.

For instance, (2) must now be understood as

- (2b) The proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet conceptually implies E,

and it is easy to see that (1), (2b), and (3) form an inconsistent triad. The argument is this. Suppose (1) that Oscar knows a priori that he is thinking that water is wet. Then by (2b), Oscar can simply *deduce* E, using only premisses that are knowable a priori, including the premiss that he is thinking that water is wet. Since Oscar can deduce E from premisses that are knowable a priori, Oscar can know E itself a priori. But this contradicts (3), the assumption that E *cannot* be known a priori. Hence (1), (2b), and (3) are inconsistent. And so in general, it seems, anti-individualism is inconsistent with privileged access.

It is worth keeping the structure of this simple argument in mind, so as not to confuse it with another (bad) argument that Burge frequently alludes to in his paper [2]. Burge sometimes characterizes the person who thinks that anti-individualism is inconsistent with privileged access as reasoning on the basis of the following sort of assumption (see for instance [2], p. 653):

- (4) Since the proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet necessarily depends upon E, no one, including Oscar, could know that Oscar is thinking that water is wet without first knowing E.

One who assumes (4) could then reason that (1), (2), and (3) are inconsistent, as follows. (2) and (4) imply that Oscar could not know that he is thinking that water is wet without first knowing E. But by (3), E is not knowable a priori. Hence, Oscar could also not know a priori that he is thinking that water is wet. But this contradicts (1). Hence, (1), (2), and (3) are inconsistent.

Burge is certainly right when he objects to this line of reasoning. The reasoning is obviously bad when necessary dependency is interpreted as metaphysical entailment. For then, one would be assuming (4) on the basis of the principle that

- (5) If *p* metaphysically entails *q*, then no one could know that *p* without first knowing that *q*.

But (5) is obviously false. For instance, even if Oscar's existence metaphysically entails the existence of Oscar's mother, Oscar can surely know that he exists without first knowing that his mother does!

Even when necessary dependency is interpreted as conceptual implication, the reasoning is bad. In this case, (4) would be assumed on the basis of

- (6) If p conceptually implies q , then no one could know that p without first knowing that q .

But, of course, it is a well known fact that closure principles like (6) are false: certainly with respect to any proposition p that can be known at all, it is possible to know p without first knowing each of (the infinite number of) p 's logical consequences.

So Burge was certainly right to object to the kind of reason he imagined one might have for believing that anti-individualism and privileged access are incompatible. But, of course, this does not show that no good reason for the incompatibility can be given. The simple argument I gave above is in fact such a good reason, and it does *not* depend on any suspicious closure principles like (5) and (6).

Rather, the argument is much more straightforward. In effect it says, look, if you could know a priori that you are in a given mental state, and your being in that state conceptually or logically implies the existence of external objects, then you could know a priori that the external world exists. Since you obviously *can't* know a priori that the external world exists, you also can't know a priori that you are in the mental state in question. It's just that simple. I myself find it hard to understand why Burge and Davidson will not just accept this obvious and compelling line of reasoning.

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