

Externalism and “knowing what” one thinks

T. Parent

Received: 3 July 2014 / Accepted: 29 November 2014 / Published online: 16 December 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

Abstract Some worry that semantic externalism is incompatible with knowing by introspection what content your thoughts have. In this paper, I examine one primary argument for this incompatibilist worry, the slow-switch argument. Following Goldberg (Pac Philos Quart 87:301–314, 2006), I construe the argument as attacking the conjunction of externalism and “skeptic immune” knowledge of content, where such knowledge would persist in a skeptical context. Goldberg, following Burge (J Philos 85(1):649–663, 1988), attempts to reclaim such knowledge for the externalist; however, I contend that all Burge-style accounts (at best) vindicate that a subject can introspectively know that she is thinking that “water is wet.” They do not yet show how a subject can introspectively know what she is thinking—which is the distinctive type of knowing at issue in the slow-switch argument. Nonetheless, I subsequently amend the Burge-style view to illustrate how an externalist can introspectively “know-what” content her thought has, and know it in a skeptic immune manner, despite what the slow-switch argument may suggest. For one, I emphasize that “knowing what” can be ontologically non-committal (so that knowing your thought is about water does not require knowing that water exists). For another, following Boer and Lycan (*Knowing who*, 1986), I stress that “knowing what” is purpose-relative—and for at least some purposes, it seems possible for the externalist to “know what” content her thought has, even if skeptical hypotheses about XYZ are relevant.

Keywords Anti-individualism · Self-knowledge · Introspection · Knowledge-wh · Slow switching · Skepticism

T. Parent (✉)
Department of Philosophy (0126), Virginia Tech, 220 Stanger Street, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA
e-mail: parentt@vt.edu
URL: <http://www.unc.edu/~tparent>

At minimum, *externalism* holds that the content of a kind thought is fixed partly by the kind in the environment.¹ Some worry that externalism is incompatible with introspective knowledge of what one is thinking (or for short, just “self-knowledge”).² In this paper, one primary argument for this worry is examined, the slow switch argument.

Following [Brown \(2004\)](#) and others, many believe that the slow switch argument is no threat to an externalist’s *ordinary* self-knowledge. That’s because ordinarily, the possibility of “slow switching” is an idle skeptical possibility, an irrelevant alternative. But it is often implicit that the argument *is* a threat if skeptical possibilities are ever taken seriously. I shall argue, however, that even this gives the argument too much credit. We will see that slow switches do not rule out all of an externalist’s self-knowledge, *even in a skeptical context*.

1 The slow switch argument

Consider Oscar (a normal, adult English speaker) who is unwittingly switched from Earth to Twin Earth (perhaps while asleep). The intuition is that, upon first arriving, Oscar will continue to refer to H₂O when using ‘water’ to express his thoughts. But after a time, it seems he will come to refer to XYZ instead, even if he remains ignorant of the switch ([Burge 1988](#); [Boghossian 1989](#)). Given externalism, however, a different referent suffices for a different content. Yet in these conditions, Oscar seems unable to know introspectively what thought-content he has. The reasoning here can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) If externalism is true, then Oscar introspectively knows what content his thought has only if he can introspectively know whether his thought is *de* H₂O versus XYZ.³ [Assumption]
- (2) Oscar cannot introspectively know whether his thought is *de* H₂O vs. XYZ. [Assumption]
- (3) So, if externalism is true, Oscar does not introspectively know what content his thought has. [From (1), (2)]

In reply, however, Burge argues that the argument neglects a special type of self-knowledge. Consider a case where introspection sustains the following judgment:

¹ See [Putnam \(1973, 1975\)](#), [McGinn \(1977\)](#), [Stich \(1978\)](#), and [Burge \(1979, 1982, 1986\)](#). There are differences between these authors, but nothing in what follows depends crucially on the details.

² In discussing self-knowledge, I vary between talk of “knowing what *content* a thought has” and “knowing what one *thinks*.” The former states most clearly what is at issue, but it can be awkward rhetorically. Thus the latter occasionally replaces the former.

³ A thought is “*de* H₂O” when its object is H₂O; and it is such even if it is opaquely ascribed as a “water” thought. Thus, ‘Bob thinks that water is wet’ does not entail ‘Bob thinks that H₂O is wet’, yet both sentences still ascribe thoughts that are *de* water/H₂O. Also, n.b., ‘knowing whether’ is not straightforward either (see [Lewis 1982](#)), yet it is typically not purpose-relative like ‘knowing what’ (cf. §4). Here, ‘knowing whether’ can be seen as shorthand for: Either Oscar knows that his thought is *de* H₂O and not XYZ, or he knows that his thought is *de* XYZ and not H₂O. (Compare with [Kallestrup 2009](#) and [Stanley 2011](#) on Schaffer’s 2007 “convergent knowledge” problem.)

(SV) I am thinking forthwith that water is wet.⁴

For Burge, the judgment is distinctive in that it is Self-Verifying: If I judge “I am thinking forthwith that water is wet,” then it seems I *really am* thinking that.⁵ (This is also defended by Heil 1988; Peacocke 1996; Bar-On 2004, and Parent 2007, among others.) Brown (2004), however, objects that the (SV)-judgment is not enough for *knowledge*. Her reason is that *per* Goldman (1976, 1986), knowledge requires discrimination among alternatives, and Oscar cannot introspectively discriminate between H₂O- and XYZ-contents. Yet as mentioned earlier, Brown holds that Oscar need only discriminate among *relevant* alternatives, and skeptical “twin” alternatives are rarely relevant.⁶ So normally, the externalist can claim introspective self-knowledge.

Goldberg (2006), however, finds this to be too concessive to the skeptic. For there is a persistent Cartesian intuition that introspective self-knowledge should not be affected by skeptical possibilities about the external world (p. 311).⁷ Or at least, it seems *an (SV)-judgment* should be resistant to skeptical attacks. (There is evidence that Burge 1988 would concur as well.)⁸ Yet Brown’s view apparently does not respect that. My aim, accordingly, is to resist the slow switch argument without surrendering (SV)-judgments as a type of “skeptical immune” self-knowledge.

Still, we must respect that the subject cannot introspect the answer to the following:

(Q) Is your thought *de* H₂O or *de* XYZ?

Brueckner (1999) notes that this inability is unsurprising, for it would require empirical knowledge of chemistry.⁹ Regardless, if we accept Goldberg’s intuition that the (SV)-judgment should be skeptical immune, then the inability creates a concern. It suggests that, for all the subject can introspect in a skeptical context, her thought may host *one of two different contents* (assuming externalism). In which case, apparently, the subject lacks *skeptical immune* knowledge of content (or just: Knowledge of content, with a capital-‘K’). The issue can be summarized in a more refined type of slow switch argument:

⁴ Burge uses the self-referring ‘with this very thought’ in lieu of ‘forthwith’. However, self-reference is potentially problematic here (see Parent 2007). In contrast, ‘forthwith’ does not *self-refer*, but rather refers only to the first-order thought that follows it. (Also, ‘I’ in (SV) should be read as an essential indexical; see Perry 1979. Though for the record, I doubt that anything genuinely indexical explains Perry’s examples; see Millikan 2001, 2012)

⁵ Here, ‘think’ does not mean ‘believe.’ Rather, to ‘think’ that *p* is to have *some* propositional attitude with the content *p*, but it does not imply any particular attitude.

⁶ Brown perhaps makes the point most forcefully, though there is some precedent in Warfield (1992).

⁷ A similar intuition is expressed in Gertler (2000).

⁸ E.g., Burge (1988) likens the “directness and certainty” of (SV) to the *cogito* (p. 649).

⁹ Perhaps the subject can answer (Q), if she knows that “XYZ” is just a fiction made up by Putnam in the 70s. But ‘XYZ’ is here acting as a placeholder for any conceivable “twin” of H₂O. Brueckner (op. cit.) also rightly notes that (Q) is *not* the same question as the more simplistic “Is your thought *de* water or *de* some kind of ‘fake water’?” After all, Oscar can know immediately that the answer to the latter has to be ‘water’ (regardless of whether he speaks English or Twin-English). Still, this does not mean he is in a position to answer (Q).

- (1*) If externalism is true, then a subject introspectively Knows what content her thought has only if she can introspectively Know the answer to (Q). [Assumption]
- (2*) A subject cannot introspectively Know the answer to (Q). [Assumption]
- (3*) So, if externalism is true, the subject does not introspectively Know what content her thought has. [From (1*), (2*)]

However, my goal is to argue that an externalist can reasonably resist (1*)—thus allowing the possibility of Burge-style, introspective self-knowledge.¹⁰

2 The “Reflective Awareness View” and skeptic immunity

Goldberg (2006) resists (1*) as well, for he holds that under externalism, the (SV)-judgment can count as self-Knowledge if:

- (a) the judgment is guaranteed to be true,
- (b) the subject is aware of the basis of this guarantee, and
- (c) the subject is aware of what this guarantee is a guarantee of, namely, the truth of the (SV)-judgment. (paraphrasing p. 308)

Crucially, this position does not require an ability to introspect the answer to (Q), even under externalism. Yet per Falvey and Owens (1994), Goldberg (1999) concedes that this ability would be necessary for *discriminatory* Knowledge between a content and a twin. Still, he maintains that the (SV)-judgment can qualify as some sort of self-Knowledge, even if one is unable to answer (Q) via introspection.

Let us call such a position the “Reflective Awareness View”. The core claim is that a self-verifying judgment counts as self-Knowledge, provided a certain “reflective awareness” of the judgment. The View is dialectically important, since it does not insist on the requirement at (1*). Hence, if viable, it would mean that premise (1*) of the refined slow switch argument is undermotivated.

Yet wouldn’t the Reflective Awareness View simply beg the question? The claim is not that the View demonstrates that slow switch arguments are *unsound*. Rather, the point is that (1*) is insufficiently defended (regardless of whether it is true).¹¹ If so,

¹⁰ An anonymous referee poignantly asks why (1*) is any less troublesome for a content internalist (if ‘externalism’ in the antecedent is replaced by ‘internalism’). This is an important question; however, for present purposes, we need not pursue it here. Granted, if the trouble arises on both sides, then it does not provide an advantage to internalism. Yet this does not mean the slow-switch argument loses all interest. Even if the problem is not unique to the externalist, it is still a *problem* that ideally she would want resolved. Also, there is dispute *among externalists* on whether a conclusion like (3*) must be accepted. (E.g., Millikan’s 1993 externalism suggests that it must.) In this connection too, the present paper argues that an externalist need not acquiesce to (3*) or related skeptical conclusions about introspective self-knowledge.

¹¹ Does a skeptic need to *defend* (1*)? He may claim that the burden is on me to rule it out. For if its truth is epistemically possible, then it is similarly possible, per (1*)–(3*), that I don’t Know what I think. And that suggests I don’t *really* Know. This last bit may assume a KK-thesis, but perhaps that too is my burden to rule out. Admittedly, I cannot settle disputes about KK here. But I would argue that they turn the skeptic into a mere “simple skeptic,” in DeRose’s (1995) sense, i.e., a skeptic who dogmatically (!) says that we don’t know. For KK alone suffices for a skeptical regress. So to presume KK without argument is really just to prejudge that we don’t know.

then contra much of the literature, slow switch arguments fail to debunk externalist self-knowledge—even in a *skeptical context*.

Some version of the View strikes me as defensible. As it stands, however, there are three objections which have not been addressed.^{12, 13} First, even if conditions (a)–(c) are met, it seems hasty to conclude that a (SV)-judgment is *immune* to skeptical doubt. After all, if Descartes doubts his ability to add two and two, then he clearly can doubt his reflections on the (SV)-judgment. Yet if we bypass skeptical doubts about reflection as such (which seems necessary in any philosophical discussion), then it is not implausible that the judgment is otherwise skeptic immune. Admittedly, this means “skeptic immunity” is limited to a proper subset of skeptics. But such limited immunity is still relevant, since Goldberg’s intuition concerns *external world* skepticism, specifically. It does not concern skepticism about reflection per se.

3 Knowing that versus knowing what

Regardless, the second objection forces us to revise the Reflective Awareness View in significant ways. Yet it is an objection to any Burge-style view on slow switch arguments, which seems thus far unnoticed in the literature.¹⁴ Observe that Burge-style views contend that the subject knows that she is thinking that water is wet. (Ignore for now the distinction between “knowing” and “Knowing.”) In the argument at (1*)–(3*), however, the conclusion is not that the subject fails to *know that* she is thinking that water is wet. Rather, it is that she fails to *know what* content her thought has.

The difference between “knowing that” and “knowing what” is not merely in the surface grammar. Consider that if a subject knows that (say) roentgenium = roentgenium, it may remain unclear whether she “knows what” roentgenium is. After all, besides such truisms, she may know of roentgenium only that it has some atomic number over 100. In which case, although the subject knows something about the stuff, it is tendentious to conclude she knows what it is.

Similarly, if the subject knows that she is thinking that water is wet, this does not mean that she knows what content her thought has. She may well know *something* about a “water-content” (e.g. that her current thought has it). Yet she still might lack sufficient background to know what a *water-content* is in the first place. Especially when talking with a skeptic, the subject’s knowledge of water may be as “thin” as the neophyte’s knowledge of roentgenium.

¹² As a fourth objection, some have protested that the View requires too much of the ordinary person to introspectively self-know. But the View gives only a sufficient condition for one type of self-knowledge; it is not stating a necessary condition on all self-knowledge.

¹³ A fifth objection is that if we know *what* we think, then we know *that* we think. Yet we should not be able to refute eliminativism just via introspection. Some mentalists reply by denying the “epistemic closure” assumed in this (e.g., Dretske 2003). Though one could instead reply that talk of “thinking” here is only instrumental, hence, ontologically neutral (cf. Dennett 1975).

¹⁴ I have since discovered that the knowing-what vs. knowing-that distinction has been noted (albeit briefly) by Goldberg (2003) and by Burge (1998). Yet Goldberg claims that slow switching debunks “knowing what” one thinks (although not “knowing that”) (p. 253). In contrast, I argue that some “knowing what” remains viable. Burge concurs with this, but supports it via his theory of preservative memory (p. 362). In contrast, I will argue the point via the purpose-relativity of “knowing-what.”

In reply, I suggest the externalist should restrict the Reflective Awareness View to (SV)-judgments where the subject is already substantially informed about water. Thus, the View would be that a (SV)-judgment can suffice for knowing what one thinks, but only if substantive facts are already known about water, e.g., that it is the colorless, odorless liquid found in lakes and rivers in the environment. In this, I am assuming that knowing what a water-content is requires substantive knowledge of *water*, the stuff. Yet that is because in the present context, ‘water-content’ is just shorthand for ‘content of a thought that is *de* water’. So plausibly, in the case of the (SV)-judgment, an externalist knows what content the first-order thought has only if she knows what water is. And, like knowing what roentgenium is, knowing what water is seems to require knowing something non-trivial about the stuff. Thus, for the (SV)-judgment to qualify the subject as “knowing-what,” she must antecedently know something substantive about *water*. (My thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this.)

Unfortunately, this requirement might leave one’s knowing-what vulnerable to skepticism. After all, it requires knowing that water is the colorless, odorless liquid found in lakes and rivers *in the environment*. However, a subject might “bracket” the ontologically loaded portion of her background knowledge, and still plausibly know enough to know-what. After all, she could still know that water is a *possible* colorless, odorless, liquid in lakes and rivers (where ‘possible’ is some kind of epistemic modal).¹⁵ Such background, along with the (SV)-judgment, may well suffice for knowing what she thinks.

Fortuitously, supplementing the (SV)-judgment with such background also helps counter a further objection. (My thanks to the same anonymous referee for pointing this out.) The objection is that an (SV)-judgment is “cognitively insubstantial,” in the manner of ‘I am here now’ (Boghossian 1989, p. 18; Gertler 2000; Farkas 2008, Chap. 6; Wikforss 2008). When I think “I am here now,” the thought is invariably true, of course. But that is because it is designed to represent where I am at the time, *wherever* that may be. Taken by itself, then, it is uninformative of the particular locale I occupy. Similarly, the complaint against an (SV)-judgment has been that, taken in isolation, it is hardly informative of what I think. It represents by design *whatever* thought occurs after “I am thinking forthwith that...”. Yet to know what she thinks, the subject is now required to possess topically relevant, substantive background knowledge. Intuitively, such background knowledge makes the (SV)-judgment “cognitively substantial;” the concept of water is not simply a “cognitive placeholder” for whatever it is I am thinking about.

Some might add that the subject’s background knowledge defines a kind of *narrow content*, a content that is individuated independently of the environment. After all, descriptors like ‘the colorless, odorless liquid...’ are often seen as characterizing

¹⁵ If there is concern that the description here is neither definite nor rigid, we can instead talk of “the possible liquid that *appears to me as if* it is in lakes, etc.,” cf. Searle (1983), Chap. 8. Yet unlike Searle, I am neutral on whether this fixes a narrow content. (The (SV)-judgment is self-verifying regardless.) N.B. to elude ontological commitment, the quantifier in ‘the liquid’ must also be read as ontologically neutral; see Azzouni (2007) for more on neutral quantifiers. Besides skeptical doubts, ontological neutrality is also important to avoiding McKinsey-type problems for externalist self-knowledge; see McKinsey (1991), Brown (1995), Boghossian (1997) and Besson (2012).

narrow contents. (Witness ‘primary intensions’ in Chalmers 1996, 2002.)¹⁶ But here I adopt neutrality on the matter. We are not forced to assume that the descriptors characterize a narrow content—for regardless, her descriptive knowledge still determines whether she has a specific *epistemic property* or epistemic qualification, viz., whether she knows enough about *x* in order to “know what” it is. In particular, if she has enough background knowledge about water (“water is a colorless, odorless liquid...”), then plausibly, this along with the (SV)-judgment [in conditions (a)–(c)] qualifies her as “knowing what” she thinks. That seems defensible, whether or not her descriptors define a narrow content.

4 Purpose-relativity and knowing what

The third and final objection to the Reflective Awareness View is that it still fails to secure *skeptic immune* knowledge (i.e., Knowledge). Again, the View does not require the ability to answer (Q) in order to Know-what. Yet the fact remains that if the subject is unable to answer (Q), then the skeptic will insist that her thought could harbor *one of two different contents*, for all she can introspect (assuming externalism). After all, her inability reflects that she fails to Know that her first-order thought is *de* H₂O, as opposed to XYZ. But given externalism, her thought would have a different content in the two cases—and this indicates a clear sense in which she fails to Know what content her thought has. (Naturally, if she were not in a skeptical context, she could just dismiss the XYZ-possibility. But since matters are otherwise, it still seems that she fails to Know-what.)

Surprisingly, however, Knowing-what might not always require an ability to discriminate between the two contents (thus described), even in a skeptical context. But to appreciate this, we first need to be clear that the semantics of ‘know what’ expressions are highly *purpose-relative* (Boer and Lycan 1975, 1986; Ginzburg 1995, 2011; Hookway 2008). This is to say that the truth-condition of a knowing what ascription is greatly determined by the *purposes* set in a given context.¹⁷

Consider, for instance, that we would ordinarily say a five-year-old “knows what” water is. After all, the child knows enough to fetch a glass of water, and so forth. Yet if asked what water is on a chemistry exam, the same child will not count as “knowing what.” For he could only guess at the correct chemical formula among the answer choices. So intuitively, the child knows what water is for ordinary purposes, though not for the purposes of the exam.

Note that the purpose-relativity view is importantly different from more familiar contextualist views in epistemology, as defended by Cohen (1986, 1998), DeRose

¹⁶ Yet primary intensions are not *identified* with descriptive contents; they are instead defined on worlds “considered as actual.”

¹⁷ Against Boer and Lycan, Braun (2006) argues that the purpose-relativity of ‘knowing what’ attributions are not in the semantics, but rather in the pragmatics or speech-act content. This is not the place to adjudicate this dispute, yet one might note that purpose-relativity seems characteristic of “knowing what” attributions *in thought* as well, where the notion of a speech-act has no application. (Cf. Heal 1994; Green 2005 on Moore’s paradox.) For more on the Boer–Lycan v. Braun dispute, and on knowing-wh in general, see Parent (2014).

(1995, 2009) and Lewis (1996). Such contextualists maintain, roughly, that the truth-condition on a knowledge-ascription is affected by how high the evidential “standards” are in a context. Yet evidential standards are different from one’s *purposes* in a context. A child may “know what” for the purposes of fetching some water, though not with sufficient *evidence* to satisfy the skeptic.

Naturally, there is some similarity between contextualism and the purpose-relativity view. Both help determine which possibilities are relevant to achieving knowledge. But the *rule* that determines relevance is different. The possibility that water = XYZ may be relevant because of the skeptic’s standards for evidence. Yet it may also be relevant simply because ‘XYZ’ is 1 of 3 answer choices on the chemistry exam. So if the purpose is to succeed on the exam, this requires us to eliminate “XYZ” as the answer, even if doing so does not demand much of any evidence.

Philosophers in the analytic tradition often react negatively to any mention of interest-relativity, and the purpose-relativity view has met such resistance (see, e.g., Sterelny 1988; Kripke 2011, n. 21). Yet on the present view, the *truth* of a response to (Q) is not relative to interests or purposes. Truths and the corresponding facts about water obtain regardless of our interests, and ditto with whether a subject knows the truth. Instead, the basic observation is that when one’s purpose is to answer (Q), not just any information about water is of interest. Yet which information is of interest is, trivially, relative to one’s interests—e.g., relative to the goal of answering (Q). So when we have this goal in mind, we “flag” specific people as possessing the information we want; we say that they “know what” relative to this purpose. This is the only way, I submit, in which knowing-what depends on interests or purposes. Certainly, nothing suggests that knowing-what depends *only* on our interests.

If the purpose-relative view is right, then whether a subject “knows what” she thinks will similarly depend on her purposes. Accordingly, if the goal is to answer (Q) via introspection, then the subject apparently cannot “know what” she thinks. For she is unable to answer without further empirical knowledge whether her thought is *de* H₂O or something that merely looks like H₂O. So for the purposes of answering (Q), the externalist does *not* introspectively know (much less Know) what she thinks.

Yet here is the vital point: There are other anti-skeptical purposes which do not require answering (Q). As the key example, think back to our old friend Descartes.¹⁸ Recall that skeptic immune knowledge or “certainty” is precisely the aim of the *Meditations*. But after the skepticism of *Meditation One*, Descartes begins *Meditation Two* with some trepidation about whether anything is certain. Soon enough, however, the *cogito* is identified—and it is also here where Descartes claims to *Know what* he thinks.

It may be unclear whether these things are certain. Again, if Descartes doubts his ability to add two and two, then it seems fair to doubt his reflections. But to repeat, if we ignore doubts about reflection, it is not obviously wrong to say that a (SV)-judgment is skeptic immune in conditions (a)–(c). If so, then an (SV)-judgment might qualify Descartes as “knowing what” he thinks—at least for the purposes of settling *one* kind of skeptical question, namely:

¹⁸ What follows is not intended as serious Descartes scholarship; the point is just to consider whether externalism allows the sort of self-knowledge claimed in the *Meditations*.

(Q2) Is anything known with certainty (= Known)?

After all, when Descartes judges (SV) in conditions (a)–(c), he has a reflective awareness that his judgment is *self-verifying*. Hence, assuming doubts about reflection are bracketed, the truth of the judgment is impossible to doubt (at least, not in a rational way, where one knowingly represents an inevitably true judgment as possibly false).¹⁹ So for the purposes of meeting the challenge posed at (Q2), Descartes seems within his rights to reply “Well, I at least Know what I’m thinking.”

Granted, Descartes would not Know *exactly* what content the first-order thought has, among all possible twins. So the skeptical question he answers would not be the characteristic question of the *slow switch* skeptic. Regardless, thanks to his reflective awareness of his (SV)-judgment, he plausibly Knows what he thinks for the purpose of answering a kind of *Cartesian* skeptic. That is so, even if slow switching is a live possibility. For regardless of any slow switches, the truth of the (SV)-judgment in conditions (a)–(c) remains (rationally) impossible to doubt. It thus seems that Descartes retains the ability to answer (Q2) affirmatively, hence, retains Knowledge of what he thinks for that purpose.²⁰

Nevertheless, it may still sound odd to say that Descartes can Know what he thinks—even though for all introspection reveals, his thought may have one of two contents (assuming externalism). But again, this just reflects that for some purposes, a subject isn’t required to distinguish water from a twin in order to “know what.” Oddly, then, knowing-what for anti-skeptical purposes is sometimes similar to knowing-what for ordinary purposes. (Though of course there are also stark differences.) For ordinary purposes, a child indeed knows what water is despite ignorance of chemistry. Similarly, Descartes may indeed Know what he thinks, for the purposes of meeting the challenge at (Q2), even if introspection yields no answer to (Q).

5 Closing remarks

To recap: The present Reflective Awareness View says that a (SV)-judgment in conditions (a)–(c) suffices for introspective Knowledge of content. In this, the (SV)-judgment is seen as *intensional*, *ontologically neutral*, and sufficient to *know what* one thinks, at least *relative to some anti-skeptical purposes*. Dialectically, it means that premise (1*) of the refined slow switch argument is undermotivated, even for Oscar’s skeptic immune self-knowledge. For the Reflective Awareness View is a viable position which implies that:

- (4) If externalism is true, one can still introspectively Know what content one’s thought has for some purposes, even if one cannot Know via introspection whether it is *de* H₂O or *de* XYZ.

Still, it should be conceded:

¹⁹ This indicates that the skeptic here is also not challenging the more obvious judgments of consistency. But that too is consistent with the skeptic being an *external world* skeptic.

²⁰ For convenience, I am glossing over the distinction between knowing for certain that the (SV)-judgment is *true*, versus knowing (SV) itself for certain. The distinction doesn’t seem to affect the present situation.

- (5) It cannot be introspectively Known what one thinks, for the purposes of answering (Q).

But insofar as the Reflective Awareness View is tenable against (1*):

- (6) The slow switch argument does not establish that given externalism, it is impossible to Know introspectively what one thinks.

That is, the slow switch argument fails to show an incompatibility between externalism and all introspective, skeptic immune, knowledge of content.

It is also worth remarking that:

- (7) (5) is no cause for philosophical anxiety.

It should be unsurprising if Knowledge of content is impossible when the purpose is to answer (Q). Who would have thought one could introspect the *actual chemical kind* that the thought picks out? Certainly not Descartes. Not only was he writing before the advent of chemistry, he admitted all along that his thoughts may be of non-actual objects, for all he can introspect. Yet given the Reflective Awareness View, it remains defensible that under externalism, Descartes still introspectively Knows what he thinks, at least for the anti-skeptical purpose of answering (Q2) affirmatively.

As a final matter, I would like to say a word about the significance of the externalism/self-knowledge debate. Though it is little noted, it should be noted that the issue reflects an important clash between philosophical paradigms before and after the linguistic (or conceptual) turn. On one hand, it is characteristic of Cartesianism that we can know contents introspectively, independently of knowing the external world. On the other hand, Frege taught us that content determines which external objects we refer to (or in Carnap's terminology, that intension determines extension). And as Putnam (1975, p. 218ff.) argues, the Fregean idea seems to result in externalism: If content *determines* reference, then a difference in reference between Oscar and Twin Oscar shows a difference in content. That seems to hold, even if their narrow psychological states are the same.²¹

So if Frege's view leads to externalism, yet this precludes Cartesian knowledge of content, then apparently *one of these paradigm-defining ideas has to go*. Either Cartesians were wrong to think we could know contents just by introspection, or Fregeans were misguided to think that content is what determines reference.²² But with the slow switch argument, the conflict between Cartesianism and Fregeanism is more apparent than real. Thanks to the Reflective Awareness View, externalism has not been shown incompatible with introspectively knowing what one thinks—even in a skeptical context.

²¹ An anonymous referee reminds me that some parts of Frege look favorable to content internalism, though other parts seem rather externalist. Regardless, my point is just that there is some pressure toward externalism in Frege, and that creates a tension with Cartesianism. But granted, such a tension may have existed in Frege's work itself.

²² Lest we think Fregeanism is unmotivated, consider that the meaning or content of a concept wholly explains why it refers to *water* as opposed to (say) alcohol, elephants, etc. But if content fully explains why the concept denotes what it denotes, then content apparently *determines* what a concept refers to. QED. Note also that *even if* externalism is rejected, an internalist would still need to combat the externalist's content skeptic. After all, the internalist does not have *skeptical immune* knowledge of internalism. In this respect, the compatibility of externalism and introspective self-knowledge is of direct concern even to an internalist.

Appendix

The semantics and metaphysics concerning “knowing-wh” is receiving more attention than ever these days. Because of that, I wish to spell out in a bit more detail the purpose-relative semantics, and what it says about Descartes and his “knowing what” he thinks. Further details on such a semantics are also found in [Boer and Lycan \(1986\)](#); I refer the reader to their impressive discussion Chaps. 1 and 2.

A “purpose” is a state of successful action, such as “fetching water” or “answering (Q).” Assume, then, that S is a subject, μ is a variable, ψ is a name, demonstrative, or definite description. And suppose that Φ is an “important predicate” for purposes P (cf. [Boer and Lycan](#), pp. 34–35). Then given a ψ , define the (possibly empty) set K_S^t of predicates that S satisfies at time t , where each predicate has the normal form $\ulcorner \mu$ knows-true that $\Phi(\psi) \urcorner$.²³ The conditions on “knowing what” are then roughly as follows:

(KW) S satisfies $\ulcorner \mu$ knows what ψ is \urcorner at t for the purpose of P iff: K_S^t requires no further predicates for an ability²⁴ in S to achieve P at t .

More intuitively, S knows-what iff she has enough knowledge-that about the denotation of ψ for an ability to achieve P . Substitutions for ‘ P ’ here might include ‘fetching a glass of water’, ‘answering correctly the question on the chemistry exam’, ‘answering (Q)’, and so on. Whereas, important predicates might include ‘is H_2O ’, ‘is *that*’ [attended by a suitable ostension], ‘is possibly a liquid in lakes and rivers’, etc.

Thus, if ψ is replaced by ‘water’, ‘ P ’ is replaced with ‘fetching a glass of water’ and $K_S^t = \{x \text{ knows-true that water flows out of taps}\}$, then (KW) implies that at t :

(KW1) S knows what water is for the purpose of fetching a glass of water iff: K_S^t requires no predicate beyond ‘ x knows-true that water flows out of taps’ for an ability in S to achieve fetching a glass of water at t .

Less formally, S knows what water is for this purpose iff her knowing that water flows out of taps is all she needs to know to fetch a glass of water. Or better, it is all the knowledge-*that* needed about *water*.

Note that (KW1) does not require S to actually possess the ability. A differently-abled person can “know what” just as much as anyone else. The idea is rather that S “knows what” if the relevant ability does not demand any further knowledge-that about water, beyond what S already has. Naturally, the ability might require *other*

²³ Boer and Lycan use ‘knows-true’ rather than ‘knows’; this is because $\ulcorner \Phi(\psi) \urcorner$ is a representation, and is a bit misleading to talk of S “knowing” a representation. It suggests a kind of *de re* knowledge of the representational vehicle as such. Even so, to say that S ‘knows-true’ a representation is not to attribute *meta*-representational knowledge of the truth of the representation. Instead, “It is for the token to perform the sort of job...which distinguishes beliefs from desires, intentions, and other attitudes” (p. 185, n. 4).

²⁴ What counts as an “ability” is not obvious; I would refer the reader to Millikan (2004, Chap. 4). Boer and Lycan do not explicitly mention abilities in their official account. But this may owe to their restricting the account to *theoretical* purposes, viz., information-gathering and such. When they speak more broadly about their view, they hint at the ability-entailing idea above. E.g., S is said to know who N is relative to such-and-such goal iff S knows an answer with “the information about N that the questioner needs *in order to carry out his project*” (p. 26, emphasis mine). Still, I do not wish to commit them to such a view; this is only to illustrate that the ability-entailing idea seems to be a natural way to extend their remarks.

things as well. But as long as she has the requisite knowledge-that, she then counts as “knowing what,” even if other requisites for the ability are absent.

What of Descartes’ “knowing what” he thinks? Where ‘ \underline{x} ’ is a variable for an essential indexical (see n. 4), suppose $S = \text{Descartes}$ and $K_S^t = \{‘x \text{ knows-true that water is a possible, colorless, odorless liquid in lakes and rivers’, ‘}x \text{ knows-true that } \underline{x} \text{ is thinking forthwith that water is wet’, ‘}x \text{ knows-true it is certain that } \underline{x} \text{ is thinking forthwith that water is wet’}\}$. Then, (KW) implies that:

(KW_D) Descartes satisfies ‘ μ knows what $\underline{\mu}$ thinks’ at t for the purpose of answering (Q2) affirmatively iff: for an ability in Descartes to answer (Q2) affirmatively, K_S^t requires no predicates beyond ‘ x knows-true that water is a possible, colorless, odorless liquid in lakes and rivers’, ‘ x knows-true that \underline{x} is thinking forthwith that water is wet’, and ‘ x knows-true it is certain that \underline{x} is thinking forthwith that water is wet’.

Furthermore, the Reflective Awareness View will suggest that:

(RA_D) Descartes satisfies at t ‘ x knows-true that \underline{x} is thinking forthwith that water is wet’ and ‘ x knows-true it is certain that \underline{x} is thinking forthwith that water is wet’ if Descartes judges (SV) at t in conditions (a)–(c).

Thus, if Descartes judges (SV) while introspecting on the judgment so as to meet (a)–(c), the Reflective Awareness View implies that (with the right background knowledge) Descartes indeed “knows what” he thinks, for the purposes of answering (Q2) affirmatively.²⁵

References

- Azzouni, J. (2007). Ontological commitment in the vernacular. *Noûs*, 41(2), 204–226.
- Bar-On, D. (2004). *Speaking my mind: Expression & self-knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Besson, C. (2012). Externalism and empty natural kind terms. *Erkenntnis*, 76, 403–425.
- Boer, S., & Lycan, W. (1975). Knowing who. *Philosophical Studies*, 28, 299–344.
- Boer, S., & Lycan, W. (1986). *Knowing who*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books.
- Boghossian, P. (1989). Content and self-knowledge. *Philosophical Topics*, 17, 5–26.
- Boghossian, P. (1997). What the externalist can know apriori. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 97, 161–175.
- Brown, J. (1995). The incompatibility of anti-individualism and privileged access. *Analysis*, 55(3), 149–156.
- Burge, T. (1979). Individualism and the mental. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4, 73–121.
- Burge, T. (1982). Other bodies. In A. Woodfield (Ed.), *Thought and object* (pp. 97–120). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burge, T. (1986). Intellectual norms and the foundations of mind. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 84, 697–720.
- Burge, T. (1988). Individualism and self-knowledge. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 85(1), 649–663.
- Burge, T. (1998). Memory and self-knowledge. In P. Ludlow & N. Martin (Eds.), *Externalism and Self-knowledge* (pp. 351–370). Stanford: CSLI Press.
- Braun, D. (2006). Now you know who Hong Oak Yung is. *Philosophical Issues*, 16, 24–42.
- Brown, J. (2004). *Anti-individualism and knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brueckner, A. (1999). Difficulties in generating skepticism about knowledge of content. *Analysis*, 59(1), 59–62.

²⁵ I thank Dorit Bar-On, Thomas Hofweber, Ram Neta, Keith Simmons, three anonymous referees, and especially William Lycan for helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also thank audiences at Vanderbilt University, and at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill for their feedback.

- Chalmers, D. (1996). *The conscious mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D. (2002). The foundations of two-dimensional semantics. In M. Garcia-Capintero & J. Macia (Eds.), *Two-dimensional semantics: Foundations and applications* (pp. 55–140). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, S. (1986). Knowledge and context. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83, 574–583.
- Cohen, S. (1998). Contextualist solutions to epistemological problems: Skepticism, Gettier, and the lottery. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76, 289–306.
- Dennett, D. (1975). True believers: The intentional strategy and why it works. In A. F. Heath (Ed.), *Scientific explanation: Papers based on Herbert Spencer lectures given in the University of Oxford* (pp. 53–75). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- DeRose, K. (1995). Solving the skeptical problem. *The Philosophical Review*, 104(1), 1–52.
- DeRose, K. (2009). *The case for contextualism: Knowledge, skepticism, and context* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dretske, F. (2003) Externalism and self-knowledge. In S. Nuccetelli (Ed.), *New essays on semantic externalism and self-knowledge* (pp. 131–142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Falvey, K., & Owens, J. (1994). Externalism, self-knowledge, and skepticism. *Philosophical Review*, 103, 107–137.
- Farkas, K. (2008). *The subject's point of view*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gertler, B. (2000). The mechanics of self-knowledge. *Philosophical Topics*, 28(2), 125–146.
- Ginzburg, J. (1995). Resolving questions: I. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 18, 459–527.
- Ginzburg, J. (2011). How to resolve how to. In J. Bengson & M. Moffett (Eds.), *Knowing how* (pp. 215–243). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, S. (1999). The relevance of discriminatory knowledge of content. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 80, 136–156.
- Goldberg, S. (2003). What do you know when you know your own thoughts? In S. Nuccetelli (Ed.), *New essays on externalism and self-knowledge* (pp. 241–256). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Goldberg, S. (2006). Brown on self-knowledge and discriminability. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 87, 301–314.
- Goldman, A. (1976). Discrimination and perceptual knowledge. *Journal of Philosophy*, 64, 355–372.
- Goldman, A. (1986). *Epistemology and cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Green, M. (2005). Moorean absurdity and seeing what's within. In M. Green & J. Williams (Eds.), *Moore's paradox: New essays on belief, rationality, and the first person* (pp. 189–216). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heal, J. (1994). Moore's paradox: A Wittgensteinian approach. *Mind*, 103, 5–24.
- Heil, J. (1988). Privileged access. *Mind*, 42(386), 238–251.
- Hookway, C. (2008). Questions, epistemology, and inquiry. *Grazer Philosophische Studien (knowledge and questions)*, 77, 1–22.
- Kallestrup, J. (2009). Knowledge-wh and the problem of convergent knowledge. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 78, 469–476.
- Kripke, S. (Ed.). (2011). Frege's theory of sense and reference: Some exegetical notes. *Philosophical troubles: Collected papers* (Vol. 1, pp. 254–291). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. K. (1982). Whether report. In T. Pauli, et al. (Eds.), *Philosophical essays dedicated to Lennart Åqvist on his fiftieth birthday* (pp. 194–206). Uppsala: Filosofi ska Studier.
- Lewis, D. K. (1996). Elusive knowledge. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74(4), 549–567.
- McGinn, C. (1977). Charity, interpretation, and belief. *Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 521–535.
- McKinsey, M. (1991). Anti-individualism and privileged access. *Analysis*, 51, 9–16.
- Millikan, R. (Ed.). (1993). White queen psychology; or, the last myth of the given. *White queen psychology and other essays for Alice* (pp. 279–364). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Millikan, R. (2001). The myth of mental indexicals. In A. Brook & R. Devidi (Eds.), *Self-reference and self-awareness: Advances in consciousness research* (Vol. 11, pp. 167–181). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Millikan, R. (2004). *On clear and confused ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Millikan, R. (2012). Are there mental indexicals and demonstratives? *Philosophical Perspectives*, 26, 217–234.
- Parent, T. (2007). Infallibilism about self-knowledge. *Philosophical Studies*, 113, 411–424.
- Parent, T. (2014). Knowing-wh and embedded questions. *Philosophy Compass*, 9, 81–95.
- Perry, J. (1979). The problem of the essential indexical. *Noûs*, 13, 3–21.

- Peacocke, C. (1996). Entitlement, self-knowledge and conceptual re-deployment. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96, 117–158.
- Putnam, H. (1973). Meaning and reference. *Journal of Philosophy*, 70(19), 699–711.
- Putnam, H. (Ed.). (1975). The meaning of ‘meaning’. *Mind, language, and reality: Philosophical papers* (Vol. 2, pp. 215–271). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2007). Knowing the answer. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 75(2), 383–403.
- Searle, J. (1983). *Intentionality: An essay in the philosophy of mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stanley, J. (2011). *Know how*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sterelny, K. (1988). Review of *Knowing who* by Stephen E. Boer and William G Lycan. *Philosophy of Science*, 55, 654–656.
- Stich, S. (1978). Autonomous psychology and the belief-desire thesis. *The Monist*, 61, 573–591.
- Warfield, T. (1992). Privileged self-knowledge and externalism are compatible. *Analysis*, 52(4), 232–237.
- Wikforss, Å. (2008). Self-knowledge and knowledge of content. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 38, 399–424.