

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND EXTERNALISM ABOUT  
EMPTY CONCEPTS<sup>1</sup>**

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McKinsey (1991) argued that content externalism precludes apriori knowledge of one's own mental contents (hereafter, apriori "self-knowledge"), and discussion of the argument remains fairly active (witness, e.g., Wright 2011; 2012, Besson 2012, Sainsbury & Tye 2012, ch. 5; Barel 2014). The aim here is to oppose the argument by defending *externalism about empty concepts* from criticisms based in Brown (1995), Boghossian (1997; 1998) and recently further developed by Besson (op. cit.).<sup>2</sup> Empty-concept externalism has been advocated before (Stoneham 1999, Sawyer 2003, Goldberg 2006), but none of these advocates have confronted the Brown–Boghossian–Besson objections. The present paper is a remedy to the situation.

At minimum, content externalism says that the content of a kind concept<sup>3</sup> is determined partly by the social and/or physical environment. The view is often associated with, inter alia, Kripke's (1972/1980) causal theory of reference. But it is worth clarifying at the start that externalists need not be causal theorists. An externalist might instead be, e.g., a Sellarsian (1954) inferential role semanticist—where content is determined by the inferences that feature the concept. (After all, "language-entry" and "language-exit" moves are partly individuated by the environmental objects in which the inferences originate or terminate.) Regardless, here I shall not be concerned with Kripkean or Sellarsian externalism as such. Instead, "externalism" here shall concern *Twin Earth externalism*, the view supported by the usual Twin Earth thought experiments. (The experiments are here presumed familiar; see Putnam 1973; 1975, McGinn 1977, Stich 1978, Burge 1979; 1982; 1986.)<sup>4</sup>

Assuming that we have apriori self-knowledge, McKinsey's (op. cit.; 1994; 2002; 2003) objection is that if the usual arguments for externalism are sound, one could reason purely apriori as follows:

1. For helpful feedback, I thank Derek Ball, Dorit Bar-On, Bill Lycan, Meg Wallace, an anonymous referee, and an audience at the 2010 Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association.
2. References to Brown and Boghossian will be to her 1995 and his 1997 unless otherwise noted.
3. A concept is assumed to be a type of mental particular which *has* a content. (This need not imply that such entities constitute a "language of thought.") In contrast, Frege held that a concept *just is* a content. (Thanks to Dorit Bar-On for emphasizing this to me.) Yet the externalism literature has largely assumed the former view, and the paper follows this lead. (But it is still assumed that the water-concept has a water-content essentially, that is, a content that determines an extension containing all and only water, i.e., H<sub>2</sub>O.)
4. However, I will not assume Putnam's (1973; 1975) attendant view that natural kind terms/concepts are indexical. For a forceful critique of his indexical account, see Burge (1982).

- (1) I have the concept WATER.<sup>5</sup>
- (2) If I have the concept WATER, then water exists.
- (3) Water exists.<sup>6</sup>

(Here,  $p$  is knowable “apriori” iff it is knowable without a dedicated investigation of the external world.<sup>7</sup>) It seems (1) can be known apriori if the externalist has apriori self-knowledge generally.<sup>8</sup> Further, since thought-experimentation occurs in the armchair, the Twin Earth thought experiments purportedly bestow apriori knowledge of (2).<sup>9</sup> These experiments suggest, after all, that if one truly has the concept WATER, then the concept refers to *water* specifically. However, if both (1) and (2) are known apriori, the externalist is then able to deduce (3) apriori. Yet (3) is not apriori.<sup>10</sup> So apparently if the thought-experiments are sound, absurdity is the result if apriori self-knowledge is assumed. Twin Earth externalism thus appears incompatible with apriori self-knowledge.

### 1. Externalism about Empty Concepts

However, the apriority of (2) can be contested. It may be said that externalism is a thesis about only *non-empty* concepts, i.e., concepts that refer (unlike PHLOGISTON or UNICORN). And whether a concept is empty is not knowable apriori. If so, then the externalist thought experiments may just *presume* that (3) is true. In which case, the thought experiments certainly would not demonstrate apriori that (3) is true (cf. McLaughlin & Tye 1998a).

Yet Boghossian holds that externalism cannot be thus limited to non-empty concepts. In brief, that’s because the same sort of thought experiments work just as well with empty concepts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, imagine “Dry Earth,” a planet just

5. Per usual, small caps are used to denote the corresponding mental representations. This is not to adopt Fodor’s (1975) language of thought hypothesis; it is just to assume that there are compositional mental representations.
6. This is the reasoning as it appears in Boghossian. Brown’s version is basically a less abstract formulation of McKinsey’s, and Brown’s version shall be addressed separately in §4. As all parties are aware, (3) and the consequent of (2) ideally would add “. . . or existed at one time.” It is also notable that (in Boghossian’s version) WATER “aims” to refer to a natural kind. Yet these details will not bear on the present discussion; so they are mentioned here only.
7. This notion of the apriori is contentious, but we shall ignore that. For discussion, see Davies (1998), Nuccetelli (1999) and McLaughlin (2000; 2003).
8. Some deny this apriori self-knowledge, e.g., Carruthers (2011). Yet the argument’s aim is to show that externalism is *incompatible* with such knowledge. Whether such knowledge actually obtains is a further matter.
9. The argument is likely improved if the talk of apriori knowledge is replaced with talk of apriori *warrant* (This in fact is how Davies op. cit., and Wright 2000; 2003, etc., frame the issue.) After all, it is a bit quixotic to say that philosophical thought-experiments bestow *knowledge*. (The pessimistic meta-induction may be too pessimistic in the case of science, but pessimism should probably be the default in philosophy.)
10. Putnam (1981) apparently disagrees; Sawyer (1998) and Warfield (1995) may also. Unfortunately, I cannot delve into this dispute here.
11. Boghossian also notes that the externalist might say that an empty concept has no content. But I agree with his negative assessment of this option, so I pass it by.

like Earth except in place of water, there are only watery-looking holograms—though the Dry Earthians mistake them for a real kind. Consider then Oscar on Earth (a normal, adult speaker) who is in the same narrow state as his doppelgänger “Doscar” on Dry Earth.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, however, Doscar uses “water” (and the concept it expresses) not in relation to *water*. Instead he apparently uses it to represent a nonexistent kind.

Further, externalists often assume the following (see esp. Putnam op. cit.):

(4) Content determines reference.

Or in Carnap’s terminology, *intension* determines *extension*. Hence, if Doscar’s concept does not refer to water, (4) implies that the empty concept must have a different content. So even for empty concepts, content seems to be determined partly by environmental facts—including facts about what is *not* in the environment.<sup>13</sup>

The contention here is that this reasoning is perfectly sound. Externalism about empty concepts may seem wildly unintuitive at first. Yet if (4) is assumed, sameness of content implies sameness of referent. So, given the difference in reference, it follows that the Earthian and Dry Earthian concepts have different contents. And thus the content of the empty concept is not wholly determined by what is “in the head.”

Empty-concept externalism is possible since externalism is a claim only about content-*determination*; it does not imply that an actual referent is needed for a contentful concept.<sup>14</sup> For the thought experiments show just that certain differences in the environment determine a different content. They do not illustrate that content comes and goes, depending on whether the object exists. Interestingly, Boghossian confirms this:

All that Twin Earth externalism is committed to, strictly speaking, is the claim that, if the referent of a given word were different, the concept it would then express would be different, too. And that is consistent with the claim that the word would express a concept in a case where it fails to refer, provided that the concept it would there express is different from any it would express in a case where it does refer. (171)

It should be clear, then, that externalism does not require reference for content.

12. As usual in the literature, we ignore that people are mostly H<sub>2</sub>O; that’s an accident of the example.

13. Since Dry Earthians are fictitious, one may wonder what all this shows about actual concepts. But Boghossian notes the same kind of thought experiment can be run on our empty concepts (169, 170).

14. Burge (2006) construes externalism as the stronger claim that a water-thought is not just determined but *constituted* in part by water. Yet this “constitution” externalism does not strictly follow from the thought experiments. Constitution could *explain* why relevant changes in social/physical facts lead to changes in content, yet it is unclear whether this inference is to the *best* explanation.

However, this seems to falsify Boghossian's premise that (2) is knowable *a priori*. If the thought experiments apply to both empty and non-empty concepts alike, then the applicability of the thought experiments to WATER could not show that WATER is non-empty. Granted, the Putnam-Burge thought experiments speak freely about water as something in our environment. But if the thought experiments apply regardless, then this feature of the experiments is inessential. Again, one might suggest that the existence of water is simply an *a posteriori* assumption of the Putnam-Burge experiments. Hence even if these thought experiments *entail* that water exists, this doesn't mean they *prove a priori* that it exists.

## 2. A Problem with Form?

Boghossian recognizes the threat of empty-concept externalism, however, and offers two different objections to the view. The first takes the following as premisses:

- (5) The concept WATER is atomic.
- (6) An empty concept is descriptive (hence, non-atomic).

I grant that (5) is true; moreover, (6) is a natural view to have about empty concepts. The idea is that an unsatisfied linguistic descriptor (or the descriptive concept it expresses) must wholly fix the content of an empty concept, given that the concept has no referent.

Notably, however, Segal (2000) and now Besson (2012) contend that a descriptivist view like (6) already departs from externalism, since the content-fixing descriptor is invariant across environments. Yet although the descriptor is constant, its content is not, if the describing-predicates (e.g., LIQUID, WET, etc) have wide contents. (Such "externalist descriptivism" has been noted before by Lepore & Loewer 1986, Devitt & Sterenly 1987/1999, and Taylor 1989.) Thus, suppose that 'liquid' is defined by Twin Earth experts as denoting liquids located on Twin Earth, specifically. (N.B., Twin Earth is here imagined to be a planet in our universe, rather than an alternate possible world.) Then, since its extension excludes H<sub>2</sub>O, the concept expressed by 'liquid' on Twin Earth will have a different extension than that expressed by 'liquid' on Earth. As a consequence, the concept expressed by 'colorless, odorless liquid' will apply to H<sub>2</sub>O in one case but not in the other. Yet by (4), this difference in extension implies a difference in intension or content. That is so, even if the twins' narrow states are the same. Indeed, Twin Oscar may be ignorant that his term 'liquid' is limited to Twin Earth—and so the twins might be in the same narrow psychological state, despite the difference in content.

So it seems (6) is not inconsistent with externalism. Regardless, Boghossian holds that if *both* (5) and (6) are adopted, empty-concept externalism is untenable since:

[T]he externalist [must] say that one and the same word, with one and the same functional role, may express an atomic concept under one set of

external circumstances and a compound decompositional concept under another set of external circumstances. But it is hard to see how the *compositional* of a concept could be a function of its external circumstances in this way. Compositionality, as I understand it, can only be a function of the internal syntax of a concept; it can't supervene on external circumstances in the way that the compound proposal would require. (This is especially clear on a 'language of thought' picture of mental representation, but is independent of it.) (172)

The claim is that, for the empty-concept externalist, the form of the Dry Earthian concept will be descriptive and the Earthian one will be atomic. And a concept's form should not be sensitive to the environment, since form is a purely syntactic affair.<sup>15</sup>

In reply, an externalist can turn the argument on its head, arguing that a concept's form *is* partly determined by the environment. For *logical* form, at least, is not just a syntactic matter. After all, a formula *f* is the logical form of a concept only if *f* is *equivalent* to the concept. And *equivalence* is a semantic matter. Thus, if the semantics of the concept is determined partly by the environment, then whether the concept is equivalent to *f* is also determined partly by the environment. And thus, whether *f* is the logical form of the concept is also determined partly by the environment. (See Korman 2006 for a similar view.<sup>16</sup>) In more concrete terms, whether 'the colorless, odorless liquid . . .' is the logical form of a concept is determined partly by whether there is an environmental referent to provide for an alternate, non-descriptive content.

Be that as it may, perhaps Boghossian's concern is not really about *logical* form. The real worry may be that under (5) and (6), the environment would partly determine the *physical* form or physical manifestation of the concept, e.g., in a language of thought. (This fits better with his claim that only "syntax" is at issue.) The objection, then, would be that the internal realizer of a concept should not be type-distinct between the twins, given only the environmental differences. Yet assuming (5) and (6), that may be what empty-concept externalism suggests.

One ineffective reply here reiterates that the Dry Earth experiment *stipulates* sameness of narrow states. Given that, the two concepts may seem to have the same physical realization *ex hypothesi*. Yet this reply fails since Boghossian can

15. McLaughlin & Tye (1998c) contend that this argument should prompt Boghossian to reject (5), whence he would see both empty and non-empty concepts as descriptive (p. 310). These authors then go on to reject such descriptivism on the usual Kripkean grounds. However, my claim is that we can leave (5) and (6) standing, and Boghossian's case against externalist self-knowledge can be shown non-demonstrative regardless.
16. In Korman's terms, the point is that the composition of a concept does not always supervene on one's intrinsic properties. But unlike myself, Korman allows Boghossian's assumption to stand that compositionality is merely syntactic. So although Korman and I both reject some type of supervenience, we may be talking about slightly different things. (Potentially, Korman's rejection amounts to Ludlow's awkward externalism about syntax; see the next note.) Also, I would not necessarily endorse Korman's counterexamples to the supervenience. Korman admits a limitation on his first example (see his n. 20), and his second example strikes me as an oddball case. And at any rate, it leaves unanswered Boghossian's charge that *in Doscars case* the environmental difference should not result in a different logical form.

respond that the stipulation thus conceived is just incoherent: Given the difference between empty and non-empty concepts, he might say it is impossible from the start for the “twins” to be in identical narrow states.

However, a better reply is available. Recall that the rationale behind (6) was not that the physical manifestation of a concept must be such-and-such if the concept is empty. Rather, it was that an empty concept must have its content fixed by some unsatisfied linguistic or mental descriptor. Yet to say that some descriptive formula defines or fixes the content in no way implies that the concept is physically realized in the brain as a descriptor (e.g., in a putative language of thought). Indeed, externalists often think of content as largely determined extra-cranially, by the linguistic community or by the experts therein. If so, then the twins’ concepts may well have their contents fixed by different means, without any internal differences.

Granted, it is common in Chomskian linguistics to identify a “logical form” with something realized in the brain.<sup>17</sup> This likely owes to Chomsky’s internalism, where semantic content supervenes on what’s in the head. If this were assumed, then a difference in content would imply a difference in physical state. But of course, the externalist rejects the starting-assumption; her view is precisely that a difference in content does not imply a difference in internal state.

A further loose end is that, since externalists are typically atomists about WATER, the switch to descriptivism in Oscar’s case can initially appear *ad hoc* (cf. Besson 2012, p. 413). However, once we recognize that logical form is partly a semantic matter, this appearance dissipates. Indeed, if Oscar and Oscar have concepts with different contents, one would hardly expect the concepts to have the *same* logical form.

True, a difference in form may not always be, specifically, a difference in atomic versus descriptive form. But what is *ad hoc* is to assume that the logical or definitional form of the concept never switches from atomic to descriptive. Since form is partly semantic, there would be no antecedent reason for the externalist to say that. Indeed, Oscar’s empty concept is exactly the sort of thing that would put pressure on that expectation.

### 3. Concept Possession

Notably, when responding to Corbí (1998), Boghossian (1998) offers a slightly different objection to empty-concept externalism. Boghossian writes:

Suppose ‘water’ expresses an atomic concept A on Earth, and that on [Dry<sup>18</sup>] Earth it expresses the compound concept B and C and D and E.

17. The Chomskian view apparently drives Ludlow (2003; 2011) to flirt with externalism about internal syntax, where the narrow states of the twins *are* different. Yet it is admitted that this view is awkward. Fortunately, as explained above, the Chomskian internalism in this is question-begging; thus the issue can be dispensed with more readily.
18. Boghossian speaks of Twin Earth here, yet he can make his point less contentiously by considering the Dry Earth concept as the non-atomic twin concept.

Then we would have to say external circumstances determine not only *which* concept a given word expresses, but also *how many* concepts a person has. Without any change in one's cognitive or functional capacities, and just by being in one environment as opposed to another, one might have either one concept or five. (259)

The problem is that the *number* of concepts will differ between the twins. The Dry Earth concept is a conceptual composite, and the Earthian concept is a single conceptual atom.

Potentially, however, this assumes that the Dry Earth concept expressed by 'water' *just is* the compound concept. But let us be clear: Even if a mental descriptor can *fix* the content of an empty concept, per (6), this does not mean the two are identical. Thus, PEGASUS may well be defined by THE WINGED HORSE CAPTURED BY BELLEROPHON—yet children often have the PEGASUS concept without the descriptor concept. (Many children have never heard of Bellerophon.) Boghossian might respond that, even if PEGASUS is not identical to *that* descriptor, it still could be identical to some other descriptor. However, it is implausible that all children who possess the PEGASUS concept have *the same* description of Pegasus. So speaking quite generally, it seems that PEGASUS is not identical to any descriptor.

As a result, the Dry Earthian does not automatically have more concepts than the Earthian. Still, even if all PEGASUS-users do not possess the same mental descriptor, perhaps the concept always requires *some* descriptor concept or other. That is (borrowing a neologism from Fodor & Lepore 1990), perhaps some version of 'concept anatomism' is true. If so, then possessing the Dry Earthian concept would still demand more concepts than the Earthian one. And that would vindicate the basic worry—that the number of concepts possessed would depend on the environment.

Regardless, even if the Dry Earthian concept requires more concepts, it does not follow that the Earthian and Dry Earthian *must* have a different number of concepts. If possessing the Dry Earth concept requires possessing concepts like COLOURLESS, ODORLESS, LIQUID, etc., the thought-experiment can stipulate that the Earthian possesses those concepts anyway. So the environmental differences do not force us to say that the twins have a different number of concepts.

#### 4. The 'Revenge' Argument

The final objection to empty-concept externalism, adapted from both Boghossian and Brown, claims that instead of (2) externalism would enable apriori knowledge of something weaker:

(2\*) If I have the concept WATER, then either water exists, or I am part of a community which uses the concept WATER.

Yet if (2\*) is known apriori along with (1), the externalist can then deduce:

(3\*) Either water exists, or I am part of a community which uses the concept WATER.

But though (3\*) is weaker than (3), it too should not be knowable apriori.<sup>19</sup>

Brown's case for the apriority of (2\*) starts by asking how the content of WATER could be fixed. Following Burge (1982), she finds it plausible that a chemist might fix its content by advancing the hypothesis 'water = H<sub>2</sub>O', even if the concept were empty. But what if the subject is agnostic about chemical essences? Then, it seems that (2\*) is indeed knowable apriori. After all, if she knows apriori that she has the concept WATER and that she is essence-agnostic, then it seems she can infer that its content must be fixed by something else, namely, by a communal definition or by an environmental kind. Yet that would be to conclude (2\*) apriori.

However, McLaughlin & Tye (1998a, b, c) reply that nothing has shown that a socially isolated, essence-agnostic externalist *definitely cannot* possess a contentful empty concept. In fact, they make the stronger claim that no such argument is available:

[T]here is no reason whatsoever to think that one cannot have a non-natural kind concept, be agnostic about the necessary and sufficient conditions for its application, and yet not be a member of any linguistic community. (1998b: 213)

But potentially, McLaughlin & Tye incur the burden of explaining how else the agnostic "Lonely Dry Earthian" might learn the concept. Yet they may retort that the burden is on Brown: She must show that this Lonely Dry Earthian cannot possess the concept, so to complete her case against externalist self-knowledge.

But instead of shifting the burden of proof, we can meet the explanatory challenge incurred by McLaughlin & Tye. For nothing rules out that the subject's *own* descriptors fix the content of her empty concept, e.g., 'the colourless, odorless liquid . . .'. Appeal to such a "private language" may offend Wittgensteinians. However, if the revenge argument requires some kind of apriori private language argument, it becomes much more contentious. (Wittgenstein certainly never said that the private language argument was apriori.)<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, since the subject is indifferent about chemical essences, her descriptors would not determine precise necessary and sufficient conditions. But at least with empty concepts, normally there *aren't* precise necessary and

19. This type of argument was initially noted in Brueckner (1992), yet it was Brown who first defended it in earnest. But Brown (2001) expresses doubts about it, and then abandons it in her (2004). N.B., Brown's version concerns Burge's (1982) externalist view only (which explicitly includes further claims about content-fixing). Also, the argument comes with similar qualifications as those mentioned in n. 6; but again, such details are not important to the issues raised here.

20. It is worth observing that, as argued by Glock & Preston (1995), Wittgenstein was no Twin Earth externalist. He not only refuses the scientific realism implicit in the view, but also rejects the idea of context-invariant meanings for terms.



sufficient conditions.<sup>21</sup> PEGASUS, for example, is not defined by a DNA sequence that constitutes Pegasus's biological essence. Rather, the concept seems fixed by Russellian descriptors like 'the winged horse captured by Bellerophon'. Perhaps that means the content of PEGASUS is somewhat "vague." But a vague content is still a content (McLaughlin & Tye op. cit.), and nothing here prevents the individual's own descriptors from affixing such a content to the concept. Recall from earlier, moreover, that this need not amount to "narrow content." Again, the contents of the describing-predicates (e.g., 'liquid') can be assumed to be wide, in that different environments can result in different predicate-meanings.

Some may insist, however, that the externalist cannot appeal just to the subject's own descriptors to fix content. "Look, externalism says that the contents of her concepts *depend on* the social and/or physical environment—and that means they can't just depend on the individual. After all, if such environmental dependence is the rule, then there must *be* a social/physical environment for the contents to depend on." And that leads us back to (2\*).

This I suspect is what drives a lot of intuitions against externalist apriori self-knowledge. But the thinking equivocates on how content "depends on" the environment. True, the Twin Earth experiments suggest that content depends on external factors in influencing which content a concept has. But they do not show that whether a concept has any content depends on extra-cranial factors. The experiments suggest merely that an environmental condition is part of the *identity condition* on the content of the concept expressed by 'water'. Nothing is shown about its *existence condition*, the condition on which the concept has a content at all (pace McGinn 1989). If so, then it is consistent with externalism that empty concepts can have contents absent a social environment.

The claim parallels the point from §1. There, we saw Boghossian admit that the externalist does not need a worldly referent for a contentful concept. But in the same way, the experiments do not reveal that a linguistic community is necessary for a contentful empty concept. For they do not describe cases where social isolation robs a concept of its content. Rather, they just illustrate how a different sociolinguistics can determine a different content.

Yet for all that has been said, some externalist views could conceivably imply (2\*). For externalism is sometimes based on an independently motivated semantics, e.g., Teleosemantics, Instrumentalism, or what have you. On such views, moreover, it may be that a concept has a content only if it has a worldly referent or a communal use. But if so, that would be due to the additional theory brought to bear on the matter, some of which may be empirical. So even if many externalist theories entail (2\*), that does not mean the Twin Earth reasoning demonstrates (2\*) apriori. Twin Earth reasoning as such neither assumes nor otherwise entails (2\*).

21. Brown (2001) recognizes this as well. In reply, she stipulates that one is "essence agnostic" only if there is a real essence to be known. Thus the subject fails to qualify as 'essence agnostic' in the case of PEGASUS. However, as Brown (2004) admirably concedes, it is then dubious whether one could know apriori that one is "essence agnostic" in this sense.

## 5. Conclusion

In the foregoing, we have seen that (1)–(3) poses no problem for externalist apriori self-knowledge, provided that externalism is extended to empty concepts. In fact, Boghossian's Dry Earth thought experiment provides a serious case in its favor, and it is virtually demanded by the Carnapian claim at (4). Moreover, it was argued that externalist thought experiments do not guarantee (2) or (2\*), much less in apriori knowledge of these things. So it seems the externalist is unable to know apriori any contingent, empirical facts—as it should be.

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