

24.500 spring 05
topics in philosophy of mind
session 3

- readings
- slides
- warrant transmission
- teatime

self-knowledge

plan

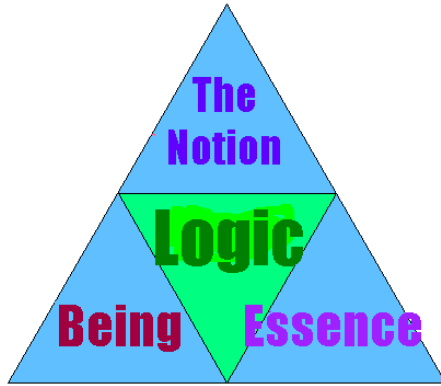
- recap of Boghossian's argument
- McLaughlin and Tye's criticisms
- Boghossian's "content and self-knowledge"
- Shoemaker's "on knowing one's own mind"

wogap: 6pm

- privileged and peculiar access
- most versions of McKinsey-style arguments focus on peculiar access



I am thinking that
water is wet



a priori?

especially because “inner sense” is a live option, self-knowledge should not be classified with knowledge of logic, etc. (cf. proprioception, clairvoyance); further, the availability of self-knowledge exhibits the dependence on one’s location or situation characteristic of empirical knowledge

McKinsey's recipe

- 1 Oscar knows a priori that he is thinking that water is wet
- 2 the proposition that Oscar is thinking that water is wet conceptually implies E (according to externalism)

hence:

C E can be known a priori

but: E can't be known a priori

note that the argument just relies on *peculiar access*

a Boghossian-style argument

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue, purely a priori, as follows:

- 1 if I think that water is wet, then water exists or other speakers who have thoughts about water exist
- 2 I think that water is wet
therefore
- 3 water exists or other speakers exist

cf. Putnam's proof

- 1 if I think that I am a brain in a vat, I am not a brain in vat
- 2 I think that I am a brain in a vat
therefore
- 3 I am not a brain in a vat

- let us use ‘from the armchair’ instead of ‘a priori’, and ask what the former phrase might mean later

a Boghossian-style argument

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue,
from the armchair, as follows:

- 1 if I think that water is wet, then water exists
[or other speakers who have thoughts about water exist—
ignored for simplicity]
 - 2 I think that water is wet
- therefore
- 3 water exists

problem: for all I know from the armchair, couldn't I be thinking that water is wet on dry earth?

earth

dry earth

...a sort of pervasive collective mirage...the lakes, rivers and taps on this particular twin earth run bone-dry

for all I know from the armchair, my water-thoughts
could be like dirt-thoughts

earth

spotless earth

...a sort of pervasive collective
mirage...the unwashed laundry
(etc) is perfectly clean

or like sofa-thoughts...

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue,
from the armchair (or sofa), as follows:

- 1 if I think that sofas have legs, then sofas exist or other speakers who have thoughts about sofas exist
- 2 I think that sofas have legs
therefore
- 3 sofas exist or other speakers exist

alternatively, perhaps my water-thoughts
are descriptive...

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue, from the armchair, as follows:

- 1 if I think that the actual liquid that falls as rain is drinkable, then there is a liquid that falls as rain
- 2 I think that the actual liquid that falls as rain is drinkable

therefore

- 3 there is a liquid that falls as rain

what needs to be established

- I can know from the armchair that
 - my water-thoughts are not like dirt-thoughts
 - my water-thoughts are not descriptive
- in Boghossian's jargon
 - the (my) concept water *aims* to denote a natural kind
 - the (my) concept water is *atomic*

Boghossian's first version

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue,
[from the armchair], as follows:

- 1 if I have the concept water, then water exists
[or other speakers who have the concept water exist]
- 2 I have the concept water

therefore

- 3 water exists

expanded version

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue, [from the armchair], as follows:

- 1 if I have the concept water, and it is atomic and aims to denote a natural kind, then water exists
- 2 I have the concept water
- 3 it is atomic
- 4 it aims to denote natural kind

therefore

- 5 water exists

the many concepts of concept

- concepts as word meanings
- concepts as Fregean senses
- concepts as pleonastic entities
- concepts as mental representations (e.g. words in a language of thought)
- concepts as conceptions

“the concept water”?

- a word’s meaning = the concept it expresses
- what is it to “have” the concept water?
- so: S has the concept water iff S believes/thinks that...water..., for some filling of the dots
 - but see p. 281, on the “language of thought” picture

my concept water...

- *...is atomic*: my word 'water' is semantically simple (unlike 'the actual liquid in the lakes', 'H₂O'; understand this so a semantically simple expression may be meaningless)
- *...aims to denote a natural kind*: I intend the word 'water' to denote a natural kind
 - note that this last feature of the concept water ineliminably involves 'water' (maybe the first feature doesn't have to be explained linguistically)

the expanded version spelt out [first pass]

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue, [from the armchair], as follows:

- 1 if I have the word 'water' in my vocabulary, and it is semantically simple, and I intend to use 'water' to refer to a natural kind, then water exists
 - 2 I have the word 'water' in my vocabulary
 - 3 'water' is semantically simple
 - 4 I intend to use 'water' to refer to a natural kind
- therefore
- 5 water exists

the expanded version spelt out [second pass]

I claim that Oscar is in a position to argue, [from the armchair], as follows:

- 1 if my word 'water' is meaningful, semantically simple, and I intend to use 'water' to refer to a natural kind, then water exists
 - 2 my word 'water' is meaningful
 - 3 'water' is semantically simple
 - 4 I intend to use 'water' to refer to a natural kind*
- therefore
- 5 water exists

*this might make (3) redundant; in any case, (4) raises tricky issues

- “from the armchair”?
 - a) a priori?
 - no
 - b) appealing to no more empirical information than that required to be a competent user of the word ‘water’?
 - no
 - c) (b) plus appealing to the fact that ‘water’ is meaningful?
 - possibly, but now it’s hardly clear that knowing that water exists in this way is unacceptable

McLaughlin and Tye

- McKinsey's recipe is perfectly fine, but you can't buy the ingredient E anywhere

- *Privileged access thesis*: It is conceptually necessary that if we are able to exercise our actual normal capacity to have beliefs about our occurrent thoughts, then if we are able to occurrently think that p, we are able to know that we are thinking that p without our knowledge being justificatorily based on empirical investigation of our environment.
 - somewhat unclear what the last clause amounts to

- since we don't know a priori what our "actual normal capacity" is, it's unclear why M&T think the PAT "has considerable intuitive support"
- compare a similar-ish thesis about knowledge of our environment:
 - it's conceptually necessary that if we are able to exercise our actual normal capacity to have beliefs about our environment, then these beliefs will sometimes be knowledge

- in any case, surely all we need is this:
 - *Privileged access thesis 2*: we sometimes know that we are thinking that p without our knowledge being justificatorily based on empirical investigation of our environment.
- note that “privileged access” is actually peculiar access
- why is PAT “silent” on belief, etc.?

- < , the property of being an orator >
- no one holds that we have privileged access even to whether we are having an object-dependent thought
- *were* someone to maintain this wildly implausible thesis, we could use McKinsey's recipe to show that she is mistaken

1. I am thinking that Cicero is an orator
2. if I am thinking that Cicero is an orator then Cicero exists

therefore

C Cicero exists

- against M&T:
- we do have peculiar access to whether we are thinking an object-dependent thought (arguably)
- we might even have a kind of privileged access, compared to knowledge of others' thoughts; the point about cognitive illusion shows only that such access is not infallible

- (M) if the concept of X is an atomic, natural kind concept, then it is metaphysically impossible to possess it unless one has causally interacted with instances of X
 - some issue about what M&T mean by 'concept'
- (M) is compatible with privileged access

- obviously one cannot know a priori that Cicero exists; it is epistemically possible that Cicero is a fictional character
- does it follow that one cannot know a priori that one is thinking that Cicero is an orator?
- in a word, 'no'
 - but: distinguish the case where 'Cicero' names a fictional character from the case where 'Cicero' is empty
 - can one know "a priori" [aka "from the armchair"] that Cicero exists? (Cicero might exist and be a fictional character)
 - not clear that one can't

(M) is too strong

- (M+) if the concept of X is an atomic natural kind concept, then one cannot possess it unless one has either causally interacted with instances of X or one has causally interacted with instances of the kinds that make up the kind X
 - a small correction needed to the discussion of water thoughts without water and other people existing:
 - Adam might have theorized that water= H_2O in the past, and has now forgotten this (but still has the concept of water)

against Boghossian's dry earth argument

- for the sake of argument, we will grant that one can know a priori whether one's concept aims to denote a natural kind and whether it is atomic
 - odd, given what M&T seem to take concepts to be
- we deny that (M)-externalists are committed to the thesis that if a term expresses an atomic concept that aims to denote a natural kind, then it must have a non-empty extension

- a concrete proposal
- the concept of water has conceptual role CR
- Toscar's word 'water' (on dry earth) expresses the concept one possesses iff one has an atomic concept with the conceptual role CR but nothing satisfies the reference-fixing description associated with it
 - "concepts" must be mental representations (see 300-1)
 - how come water is atomic if it has a "reference-fixing description"?
 - in the absence of more information about (a) "concepts", (b) "conceptual roles", the proposal is hard to evaluate

- next time:
 - Shoemaker, on knowing one's own mind, first-person access, self-knowledge and 'inner sense'