



## Self-Knowledge and Inner Space

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## Self-Knowledge and Inner Space

Cynthia Macdonald

In the past three decades, externalism in the philosophy of mind has become an entrenched position. The view has been variously formulated, but a central claim involved in it is that some intentional states, ones such as my thinking that that tiger has stripes, have contents that are individuation-dependent, and so dependent for their very existence on factors beyond the minds of their subjects. Suppose that externalism, thus described, is true, and accordingly, that the “fully Cartesian” conception of the inner realm as consisting of contentful states whose contents would remain invariant even if there existed nothing beyond the minds of persons, is false. Then it seems that a subject could be mistaken about the natures and contents of her own intentional states, even to the extent that she might have the illusion of entertaining a thought with a given content when there is no such thought to be entertained. What are the consequences of this view for the belief that there is an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others, in that subjects are at least sometimes authoritative<sup>1</sup> with regard to knowing what thoughts they are thinking?

John McDowell (1986) holds that there are *no* consequences for that view. On the contrary, he claims, it is only if one buys into the “fully Cartesian” conception of the inner that one might be tempted to think that the supposed asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others is problematic and needs explaining. If one rejects that conception, then there is nothing problematic about the asymmetry, even

given externalism. In short, it is the “fully Cartesian” conception of the inner realm, and not externalism, that is the source of the illusion that there is a problem about privileged self-knowledge that needs addressing.

I think that this is wrong. Even if one rejects the “fully Cartesian” picture, the asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others is something that needs explaining in the light of externalism. In what follows, I want to make a case for this. I begin, in section I below, by setting out the problem that externalism seems to pose for the view that subjects have authoritative self-knowledge of certain of their thoughts. Then, in section II, I discuss the central features of the “fully Cartesian” picture, whose rejection seems forced by the acceptance of externalism. In section III I argue that even if one accepts externalism and rejects the “fully Cartesian” conception, externalism presents a real problem for the view that there is authoritative self-knowledge, and so there is a need to develop an account of what that authority consists in. Finally, in section IV, I identify one clear sense in which subjects can be said to be authoritative with regard to knowledge of their thoughts in the light of externalism, and the sorts of feature an account of this knowledge might exploit.

## I Externalism and Authoritative Self-Knowledge

Externalism in the philosophy of mind is a doctrine whose roots stem from the work of Hilary Putnam (1975) and Tyler Burge (1979, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988). Briefly, it is the view that certain intentional states of persons have contents that are “world-involving” in that they depend on the existence of objects and/or other factors beyond

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<sup>1</sup> By “authoritative” I mean here “better placed,” whether or not this includes infallibility.

the minds of their subjects.<sup>2</sup> Suppose that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes, and that this thought falls into the class of thoughts to which externalism applies. My capacity to think it depends on the existence, in the world around me, of tigers. I could not think a thought with this content in a world in which there were no tigers. I might have the illusion of thinking such a thought; but this would be merely an illusion.

McDowell is an externalist, particularly with regard to singular thoughts, ones of the form, “That F is/has G,” such as the thought that that tiger has stripes.<sup>3</sup> He also endorses a specific type of externalism, according to which the contents of subjects’ thoughts are Fregean modes of presentation. For McDowell, there are three items about which we can speak when we speak of a subject’s entertaining a singular thought (such as a demonstrative one). First, there is the thinking, the current conscious (inner) mental event or occurrence in the subject. Second, there is what one is thinking about, what we might call the *object* of the thought. In the case of a true thought, this is a state of affairs or fact, or a truth-value. Third, there is the content of one’s thought, or *how* what is thought about is presented. On this view, the content of one’s thought, in the case of a singular thought, is what one thinks: a singular proposition, whose constituents are Fregean modes of presentation. In the case of a true thought, McDowell claims, “*what one thinks is the case*” (1994: 27).<sup>4</sup> If externalism is true of singular thoughts, one can have them only in cases where the objects thought about (*what one is thinking about*) exist. Further – and this is a point to which we shall return – the point of introducing a class of object-dependent

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<sup>2</sup> Note that I do not say “beyond the bodies of their subjects.” For one thing, one can have singular thoughts about parts of one’s body, say, one’s nose. But I also want to leave it open whether externalism might be true of such phenomenal states as sensations; and to do so I need to allow that the physical factors that exist within the bodies of persons might help to individuate such states.

<sup>3</sup> See McDowell 1986. He includes in this class of singular thoughts ones involving proper names. See McDowell 1977.

thoughts, with “the Fregean fineness of grain needed for them to serve in perspicuous accounts of how minds are laid out, lies in the way it liberates us from Cartesian problems” (1986: 146). McDowell’s commitment to singular-thought externalism is thus motivated by his rejection of a “fully Cartesian” picture of the inner realm. Hostility to this picture lies at the core of his philosophy.

What problem does externalism seem to pose for the view that subjects have authoritative self-knowledge? It seems to imply that subjects can be mistaken not only about whether the thoughts they are actually thinking are true of the world around them, but also about whether they are thinking certain thoughts it seems to them that they are thinking. More generally, it seems to imply that others can be better placed than a subject to know whether that subject is thinking thoughts of the kind that she takes herself to be thinking, irrespective of whether she *is* thinking those thoughts.

Three sorts of case seem to present problems for the view that subjects have authoritative self-knowledge of the contents of such thoughts. The first concerns situations in which a subject may take herself to be entertaining a thought of a certain kind but is not, because to do so would require the presence of a particular object in her visual field where none exists. Consider, for example, a subject who lives in an environment in which there are tigers and who attempts to think a thought of the type “that tiger has stripes” in a situation in which there is no suitably situated tiger. Although she may have thought token thoughts of that type in the past in contexts in which tigers were visually present to be demonstrated, she fails in this case to think a token thought of that type.

This kind of case threatens authoritative self-knowledge because it is one where the subject mistakenly takes herself to be thinking a thought that is not, in her

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<sup>4</sup> Dodd (1995) has termed this McDowell’s identity-theory of truth.

situation, available for her to think; and another may be better placed than her to know this. It contrasts with a second sort of case. Suppose that a subject is attempting to think a thought of the type “that tiger has stripes,” not just in a situation in which there is no suitably situated tiger present in her visual field, but in a world (Twin Earth) in which there are no tigers at all but only pligers – creatures which look, feel, and behave like tigers but have a different biological constitution. In this case there is no *tiger* content – real or apparent – in the inner realm to constitute the content of her thought. In this case, unlike in the first one, it is not even possible for the subject to entertain singular token *tiger* thoughts on other occasions; and another, who has better knowledge of the facts of biology and knows that the world in which they are living is not Earth but Twin Earth, might be in a better position than the subject is to know this.

Both of these cases contrast with a third type of case, where a subject *rightly* takes herself to be thinking a thought with a certain content but where she nonetheless lacks authoritative self-knowledge of that thought. Thus, consider a situation in which someone knows the facts about biology and Twin Earth, where there are pligers but no tigers, and knows that she has not, unbeknownst to her, been transported to Twin Earth. This person seems to be in a better position to know that the singular *tiger* thoughts of another, who is ignorant of the facts about chemistry and Twin Earth, are indeed *tiger* thoughts. Here externalism seems to jettison authoritative self-knowledge, not because there is no thought of the kind available for the subject to think, but because another may be in a better position than the subject to know that the object demonstrated is indeed a tiger.

One familiar way of attempting to rescue the conviction that subjects are at least sometimes authoritative with regard to knowing the natures and contents of their

own thoughts in the face of externalism is to distinguish epistemological issues about content from semantic-cum-metaphysical ones (cf. Burge 1985, 1988). It is one thing to know that the thoughts one is currently consciously thinking are *tiger* thoughts, and another to know what makes *tiger* thoughts *tiger* (as opposed to *pliger*) thoughts. Consider, by way of analogy, cases of perceptual knowledge. I can know that that tiger visually present in front of me has stripes without knowing what individuates tigers from other animals. Similarly, the thought might continue, I can know that the thought I am thinking is a *tiger* thought without knowing what makes it a *tiger*, rather than a *pliger*, thought.

However, this claim, even if correct, doesn't solve the problem that is pressing here. The doubt that externalism raises is not just about whether that view is compatible with self-knowledge. It is about whether the view is compatible with *authoritative* self-knowledge, the kind of knowledge that lies at the heart of the supposed asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others. The analogy with perceptual knowledge cannot help here, principally because the intuition that needs defending is not that a subject can know her own thought contents even when she does not know what individuates them as the contents they are. It is, ironically, that her knowledge is authoritative, *despite* the fact that she does not know what individuates her thought contents as the contents they are. The puzzle that externalism presents is that, *unlike* perception, where knowing what makes a tiger the biological creature it is may put a subject in a better position than another to know that the animal visually present is a tiger, the authoritative status of self-knowledge does not seem to be threatened by ignorance of the individuation conditions of one's own thought contents.

So, even if self-knowledge is analogous to perception in the way suggested (namely, that one can know that one is thinking a thought with a certain content without knowing what makes that content the content it is), appeal to the perceptual analogy does not help to show how externalism might be compatible with authoritative self-knowledge. Moreover, the appeal to perception is itself problematic. Many have argued that the perceptual analogy is misguided altogether because self-knowledge is fundamentally unlike observation or perception (Burge 1996, 1998; Peacocke 1996, 1998; Shoemaker 1994). Specifically, it has been argued (Shoemaker 1994) that, in perception, the objects of perceptual knowledge can exist independently of their being perceived, and independently of there being creatures capable of perceptual experience. But this independence condition is not met in the case of self-knowledge.<sup>5</sup> It is in the nature of intentional states that they are capable of being known by their subjects, and known in a certain way. The ability to think intentional contents is inseparable from being able to employ them in inferences, including practical ones, involving other contents. One needs to be able not only to engage in such inferences, but also to at least sometimes know what inferences one is engaging in, since part of what it is to be a reasoning creature is to be capable of critically reviewing and evaluating one's reasonings as reasonings. One cannot exercise this ability without being able to distinguish contents from one another. But this seems to require that subjects be capable of full knowledge of at least certain of their thought contents, and with this, knowledge of their individuation conditions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> But cf. Macdonald (1999) who criticizes this argument.

<sup>6</sup> But see Tyler Burge, who claims that, if externalism is true, certain contents – those that are individuation-dependent on factors beyond the minds of persons – are ones that subjects employ in thought and practical inferences without knowing what makes those contents the contents they are. His point is that full mastery of contents is an unreasonable requirement to place on thinkers, since most rational and competent thinkers and speakers regularly fail to meet it. Note, though, that his claim is not that one can have full mastery of a content without knowing what makes it the content it is.



Some take this conclusion to show that externalism is incompatible with authoritative self-knowledge because it has the consequence that such knowledge of certain contents entails knowledge of the empirical factors that individuate them, which is absurd (McKinsey 1991). Others argue that since the individuation conditions of contents are constitutive of them, the appropriate comparison in the case of perceptual knowledge is not with the case of knowing that, say, the animal visually present is a tiger. Rather, it is with the case of knowing that, say, the person visually present is sunburned. One might know that something visually present is a tiger without knowing what makes a tiger the animal that it is. But one cannot know that something visually present is sunburned without knowing that it has been burned by the sun.<sup>7</sup>

If this second point is right, fundamental differences between perception and self-knowledge imply that authoritative self-knowledge is actually incompatible with externalism. Evidently, the problems that externalism presents for the view that there is authoritative self-knowledge run very deep. They are not ones that are easily solved by comparison with cases of perceptual knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Howard Robinson (1994: ch. 5). He claims that consciousness of perceptual content involves consciousness of all of its relata: “from the perspective of reflective consciousness, content is constitutive of the mental state: it is like perceiving a family rather than like perceiving a father, in that all the relata must be included in the grasp and not merely exist outside the scope of the awareness.” He concludes that externalism is incompatible with the identity-theory of the mental and the physical, since “awareness of a state as mental involves awareness of its content, but no awareness of a brain state *per se* will involve awareness of any external object standing in a causal relation to it. Considered as a state of which we can be reflectively conscious, therefore, a mental state cannot be identical to a brain state” (all quotations from p. 146). I think that Robinson begs the question against the identity-theorist by assuming that intentional states cannot be relationally individuated without being relationally *constituted*. See Cynthia Macdonald 1989: ch. 5.

## II The “Fully Cartesian” Conception

The attempt discussed above to defuse the threat from externalism to the view that subjects at least sometimes have authoritative knowledge of their own thought contents looks initially as though it does not involve commitment to any problematic Cartesian assumptions. It simply attempts to extend the application of features of perceptual knowledge to cases of self-knowledge. However, McDowell argues that the presumption that externalism poses a threat to authoritative self-knowledge *already presumes* what he calls a “fully Cartesian” conception of the inner realm. Once this is recognised, and the conception’s grip on those who accept the presumption is dislodged, no attempt is needed to “rescue” authoritative self-knowledge from the apparent threat. What is this “fully Cartesian” conception, and how does it invade the thinking of those who view authoritative self-knowledge as threatened by externalism?

The fully Cartesian picture is a conception of subjectivity that begins with the assumption that, irrespective of whether one might be in doubt about what lies beyond the mind, one cannot be in doubt about what lies within it. One cannot be in doubt about how things seem to one to be. One’s “intellectual” seemings, so to speak, are a special case of how things are; special because they are *inner facts*; facts about how things seem to one to be.<sup>8</sup>

Further, these facts are not just indubitable; they are infallibly knowable. If, attending to my apparent perception that that tiger has stripes, I think that it seems to me that that tiger has stripes, I know that it seems to me that that tiger has stripes. Although I can be mistaken about how things are in the world beyond my mind, I

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<sup>8</sup> “Intellectual seemings” is a term used by Burge 1996 and Bealer 1999.

cannot be mistaken about how things are in the world that lies within it. I cannot be mistaken about the fact that it seems to me that that visually present tiger has stripes. This implies that although I can get it wrong whether the contents of my seemings are answered to in the world that lies beyond my mind, I cannot get it wrong what the contents of these seemings are.

This picture, McDowell claims, falls short of the “fully Cartesian” conception, and he has no objection to it. His reason is that, so far as it is committed to subjects’ infallible knowledge of facts about how things seem, it is compatible with a “disjunctive” account of such facts.

Short of the fully Cartesian picture, the infallibly knowable fact – its seeming to one that things are thus and so – can be taken disjunctively, as constituted either by the fact that things are manifestly thus and so or by the fact that that merely seems to be the case. On this account, the idea of things being thus and so figures straightforwardly in our understanding of the infallibly knowable appearance; there is no problem about how experience can be understood to have a representational directedness towards external reality. (1986: 150)

This less-than-fully – or, what might be called “quasi-Cartesian” – picture is capable of accommodating the idea that there is authoritative self-knowledge and along with it an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others. Why? Because the infallibly knowable facts of the inner realm are facts about how things seem to their subjects to be, and in itself there is nothing objectionable about the idea that subjects may have a way of knowing these facts that is not subject to the sorts of error that is characteristic of knowledge of facts that lie beyond the inner realm.

At the same time, this quasi-Cartesian picture is compatible with externalism, precisely because the infallibly knowable facts that constitute the inner realm can be understood disjunctively, as constituted *either* by the fact that things are manifestly thus and so to the subject *or* by the fact that things merely seem to be thus and so.

Of facts to the effect that things seem thus and so to one, we might say, some are cases of things being thus and so within the reach of one's subjective access to the external world, whereas others are mere appearances. (1986: 150)

Because of this, the externalist consequence that another might sometimes be in a better position than a subject to know that subject's mental states can also be accommodated. Specifically, someone might be in a better position than me to know, of the infallibly knowable fact about how things seem to me to be, which disjunct obtains: whether it is a case of knowing how things are within the reach of my subjective access to the external world, or whether it is a case of knowing how things merely seem to me to be.

Short of the fully Cartesian picture, there is nothing ontologically or epistemologically dramatic about the authority which it is natural to accord to a person about how things seem to him. This authority is consistent with the interpenetration of the inner and the outer, which makes it possible for you to know the layout of my subjectivity better than I do in a certain respect, if you know which of those two disjuncts obtains and I do not. In this framework, the authority which my capacity for "introspective" knowledge secures for me cannot seem to threaten the very possibility of access on your part to the facts within its scope. (1986: 154)

If this is the quasi-Cartesian picture of the inner, what more is involved in the "fully Cartesian" one? Evidently, the latter takes the further step of assuming the realm of inner facts to be *autonomous* with respect to the outer realm. It takes how things seem to be "self-standing" infallibly knowable facts about how things are in the inner realm. It does not make it obligatory to understand the facts about how things seem disjunctively. It takes facts in the outer realm to be only "extrinsically" or "externally" related to facts in the inner realm.

As this final way of characterizing the additional assumption made by the fully Cartesian conception brings out particularly clearly, that conception is incompatible

with externalism. It is incompatible because, if externalism is true, certain contents are not extrinsically or externally related to factors in the outer realm: those factors serve to individuate those contents as the contents they are. McDowell thinks that we should reject the fully Cartesian conception because it risks severing the inner from the outer realms, and, with this, risks the very possibility of having contentful thoughts at all.

### III Externalism and Authoritative Self-Knowledge

Suppose that we reject the fully Cartesian picture of the inner for the reasons given. Is it possible to consistently combine externalism with the quasi-Cartesian conception in a way that preserves the two important claims that (a) there is “interpenetration between inner and outer” (1986: 154) and (b) subjects are authoritative with respect to knowing their own thought contents? Further, does this combination allow one to take a “quietist” attitude toward authoritative self-knowledge, one which deems it unnecessary to give a substantive account of how it is that subjects are at least sometimes in a better position than others to know the contents of their own thoughts?

McDowell believes so. As he puts it:

By itself, there is nothing dangerous about the idea that how things seem to one is a fact, knowable in a way that is immune to the sources of error attending one’s capacity to find out about the world around one. We can think of this “introspective” knowledge as a by-product of our perceptual capacities, available on the basis of a minimal self-consciousness in their exercise. (1986: 154)

In another context, he continues:

“How is it possible that . . .?” . . . is indeed a good way to express philosophical difficulties of a familiar kind, and some such difficulties may be worth tackling. . . . If a question of that shape is to express a determinate philosophical difficulty, it must be asked from a frame of mind in which there is at least a risk of its looking as

though whatever the question is asked about is *not* possible. So one's first move, if someone tries to interest one in a "How is it possible?" question, should be to ask: why exactly does it look to you, and why should it look to me, as if such-and-such a thing (e.g., baseless authority about oneself) is *not* possible? (1998b: 58)

And McDowell is a quietist. He believes that there is no need for a substantial epistemology of authoritative self-knowledge, and that only somebody already in the grip of the fully Cartesian conception could think that the authoritative status of self-knowledge presents a problem that needs solving. His reason is that it is only if one views the realm of the inner as autonomous with respect to the outer that one can no longer view authoritative self-knowledge as a simple by-product of the exercise of one's ordinary cognitive capacities, capacities directed toward a world to which others have access. One then seems forced to appeal to the idea of a kind of inner observation, an inner vision, in order to account for such authority.

But is this right? The case rests on whether the quasi – or not quite fully – Cartesian conception has the resources to accommodate authoritative self-knowledge compatibly with externalism. This is a conception of the subjective domain that tries to respect features that seem essential to the states that fall within it, namely, representational directedness toward the world and accessibility to introspection, without taking the further step of construing that domain as autonomous. The question, then, is whether those features are capable of grounding authoritative self-knowledge consistently with externalism.

McDowell thinks that they can because they allow one to take the knowable facts about the inner – facts to the effect that things seem thus and so to oneself – to be infallibly knowable, where such infallibility is part of the *acceptable* Cartesian conception. They are so knowable because, once the inner is viewed as interpenetrable by the outer, they can be taken disjunctively. I can infallibly know that

it seems to me that that tiger has stripes. What I infallibly know when I know this is *either* that it is manifestly the case that that tiger has stripes, *or* that it merely seems to me that that tiger has stripes. This is true not only of my knowledge of how things seem to me to be in the world beyond me, and in particular, of my perceptual seemings, but also of how things seem to me to be in the inner realm, the world within me. It must be true of how my own mental states – states that are the by-products of the exercise of outwardly directed cognitive capacities like perception – seem to me to be.

So, suppose that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes. What is the infallibly knowable *inner* fact, taken non-disjunctively, that I know when introspecting, when thinking *about* this thought? Is it that it seems to me that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes? This seems right, if the analogy with McDowell's account of how to take facts about how things seem to me to be in the outer world – the world beyond me – is to go through. Taken *disjunctively*, then, what I infallibly know when I know that it seems to me that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes is *either* this: that it is manifestly the case that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes, *or* it is this: that it merely seems to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes. Put another way: of facts to the effect that it seems to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes, some are cases of genuinely thinking that that tiger has stripes within the reach of my subjective access to facts in the inner realm, and others are mere appearances. Subjective access to facts in the inner realm is, for McDowell, the exercise of a kind of "minimal self-consciousness" that is a by-product of the exercise of my outward-directed cognitive capacities.

But consider now the first type of case that might be thought to pose problems for authoritative self-knowledge given externalism mentioned earlier, in Section One. Suppose that I am in a situation in which I mistakenly take myself to be thinking a thought of the form “that tiger has stripes,” mistakenly, because there is no suitably situated tiger in my visual field for me to demonstrate, and so no thought available for me to think. The problem externalism seems to pose here is that another may be better placed than me to know this. More specifically, another may be in a better position to know, not *which* of the two disjuncts – (1) it is manifestly the case that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes or (2) it merely seems to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes – obtains, but *whether* there is any such disjunct available for me to know at all. If my thought contents are not *tiger* ones, then I cannot undergo even an apparent thought with this content, and so neither (1) nor (2) is available for me to think. And another might be in a better position than I am to know this.

McDowell might acknowledge this but point out that the mere fact that there is no suitably situated tiger present in a my visual field is not sufficient on its own to rob me of the ability to think any thought with a *tiger* content. So long as there are tigers in my world, and I am able to demonstrate them in singular thoughts in contexts other than the one that I am currently in, the absence of a suitably situated tiger in this particular situation will make it impossible for me to think this particular token *tiger* thought, but it will not prevent my thinking such token thoughts on other occasions. Further, in order for it to seem to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes, it may suffice that there be a *sort* or *type* of *tiger* content that I can employ in other contentful token thoughts, one of which I wrongly suppose myself to be thinking in the present situation. Thus, he says:

Particular *de re* senses, each specific to its *res*, can be grouped into sorts. Different *de re* senses (modes of presentation) can present their



different *res* in the same sort of way: for instance, by exploiting their perceptual presence. And the univocity of a context-sensitive expression can be registered by associating it with a single sort of *de re* sense. . . . Given a context, a sort of *de re* sense may determine a *de re* sense (if one cares to put it like that), or else it . . . may determine nothing. And in the latter sort of case, according to this way of thinking, there can only be a gap – an absence – at, so to speak the relevant place in the mind – the place where, given that the sort of *de re* sense in question appears to be instantiated, there appears to be a specific *de re* sense. (1986: 288)

One might say that what gives the appearance to a subject that she is thinking a particular token *tiger* thought is precisely that there *is* available to her a *sort of de re* sense, the *tiger* sort, which she mistakenly thinks in this situation is instantiated in a particular place in her mind.

This response is unlikely to convince someone who thinks that the case envisaged compromises authoritative self-knowledge. The reason is that it concedes that another might be in a better position than the subject, not to know what thoughts she is thinking (i.e., which disjunct is in question), but to know that there are no contents available for her – however it may seem to her – to think. But perhaps this foists on McDowell a position he does not and need not hold. It supposes that authoritative self-knowledge requires, not just that a subject be in a better position than another to know what it seems to her that she is thinking when she is indeed thinking it, but that she be in a better position than another to know, in a situation in which she fails altogether to think a particular thought, that it only seems to her that she is thinking a thought with a particular content *because* there is no such thought content available for her to think. That is to say, it supposes that she must also be in a better position than others to know that there is “a gap – an absence – at, so to speak the relevant place in the mind – the place where, given that the sort of *de re* sense in question appears to be instantiated, there appears to be a specific *de re* sense.”

McDowell might object that the asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others only applies in cases where there is a thought content available for the subject to think. With respect to that content, he might insist, a subject is in a better position to know what it seems to her that she is thinking than is another. Despite this, knowledge of the externally constrained individuation conditions of content may put another in a better position than the subject to know which disjunct is in question. Equally, in a particular situation in which neither of the disjuncts is available at all for the subject to think, it may be that another is in a better position than the subject to know this. But again, this does not compromise a subject's authority with respect to knowing what thought she is thinking, since in that case there is no thought available with respect to which she can be knowledgeable, let alone authoritatively knowledgeable.

A similar response can be made to the second sort of case mentioned earlier. Suppose that I am attempting to think a thought of the type, *that tiger has stripes*, not just in a situation in which there is no suitably situated tiger present in my visual field, but in a world in which there are no tigers at all but only pligers. In this case there is no *tiger* content – real or apparent – in the inner realm to constitute either disjunct (1) or disjunct (2). Not only is there no particular *de re* sense, but there is no *sort* of *de re* sense, so I am not even able, as in the first case envisaged above, to entertain singular token *tiger* thoughts on other occasions. As Evans puts the point:

those who hold that a person may wrongly think he has a thought of the form “*a* is *F*” need [not] be committed to the view that such a subject has a thought of the form “I am thinking that *a* is *F*.” All that is being credited to such a subject is the intention of thinking a thought of a certain particular kind, and the belief that he is thinking such a thought. Obviously if there is no thought of the appropriate kind available, then there is no possibility, either for the subject or for anyone else, of giving the content of the thought he wishes, but fails, to entertain. (1982: 46)

When Evans says “and the belief that he is thinking such a thought,” he cannot and does not mean “and the belief that he is thinking that *a* is F.” Nor can he mean “and the belief that he is thinking a thought of the form, ‘*a* is F,’” if this requires thinking a thought of the “*a* is F” kind, since a world in which there are no *as* is a world in which (to use McDowell’s terminology) there are no specific *de re a*-senses *and* a world in which there is no *de re a*-sense sort. To say this is not necessarily to say that nothing is going on in the inner realm of the subject at all. Words, images, and/or various subsidiary thoughts with genuine content might be passing through his mind. What is not going on in his mind, however, is a thinking of a genuine singular thought with the content, *a* is F. Nor is he mistakenly supposing that a sort of *de re* sense is instantiated in a place in his mind where there is only, so to speak, a gap, since there is no such sort.

The objection that this case suggests is that, if externalism is true, another might be in a better position than the subject to know that although it might be for him exactly as if he were thinking a thought of the type “that tiger has stripes,” he fails to think a thought of the type he supposes himself to be thinking, because there is no object in his world of the kind required for him to think a thought of that type in his world. And if he cannot think such a thought, he cannot think a thought of the type, “It seems to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes,” since there is no such content available for him to think.

In short, the objection is that externalism seems to rob subjects of infallible self-knowledge. In order for a subject to know infallibly that it seems to her that she is thinking a thought of the type, “that tiger has stripes,” there needs to be a *tiger* content embedded in the content of her thought. This is so even if it only seems to her that she is having a thought with that content. If externalism is true of such contents, a subject

can think them without having knowledge of their individuation conditions. So another, who knows what would be required for there to be genuine singular thoughts of the type “that tiger has stripes,” and who knows that such a requirement is not met, can undermine that subject’s claim to infallibly know that it seems to her that she is currently consciously thinking a thought of the type “that tiger has stripes.”

But, again, it is open to McDowell here to deny that there is a problem of authoritative self-knowledge in this second kind of case for his view to deal with, on the following grounds. That another may sometimes be in a better position than a subject to know whether there is a fact – real or apparent – of the relevant kind for her to know doesn’t compromise a subject’s authority with regard to knowing what the contents of her apparent thoughts are, the case envisaged notwithstanding. For, in this case, there are no thought contents of the relevant kind available for the subject to know, let alone authoritatively know. So another cannot be better placed than the subject is to know the nature and contents of the thoughts she is thinking.

Furthermore, what another *is* better placed to know in a situation such as this – namely, that there is no thought available, real or apparent, of the kind the subject takes there to be for her to think – is not something that any subject *could* be authoritative about, given externalism. So there simply is no problem of authoritative self-knowledge, given externalism, here to solve.

This will be counterintuitive to anyone sympathetic to the Cartesian conception of subjectivity, since, if it is true, subjects really can be very confused both in supposing in particular cases that they are thinking certain thoughts at all – in supposing that there are certain places in their minds where sorts of *de re* senses are instantiated – and in supposing that there are sorts of *de re* senses to be so instantiated. Part of the attraction of the Cartesian conception is that it might have the

resources to avoid having to accept it. Still, McDowell argues persuasively that the cost of endorsing this aspect of the Cartesian conception is to forfeit the “interpenetration of inner and outer” and so to commit to the *fully* Cartesian picture. Since it is no part of McDowell’s view to embrace this picture, but it *is* part of his view to embrace the quasi-Cartesian conception, where this allows for infallible self-knowledge, I shall take it that he construes the latter as permitting infallible self-knowledge only in cases where there are thoughts available of the kind a subject takes there to be for her to think. That is, I shall take McDowell’s view to be that only in cases of object-dependent thoughts where there are suitably situated objects for subjects to think about can subjects have authoritative (i.e., infallible) self-knowledge, not just about whether it seems to them that things in the world beyond the mind are thus-and-so, but about whether it seems to them that things in the inner realm are thus-and-so.

In short, then, McDowell’s position seems to be this. If there *is* an inner fact – a singular thought – available for a subject to know, she is capable not only of knowing it, but of knowing it infallibly, even if externalism is true. This is simply because to grasp a thought is to grasp it in terms of its content, so that a subject cannot think a thought by grasping a content other than the one it has. If she were to grasp her thought by means of a content other than the one it has, she would be thinking a different singular thought altogether. If there *isn’t* an inner fact of this kind available for a subject to know, then she not only cannot know it infallibly but cannot know it at all, if externalism is true. She may be thinking a thought of another kind, say, a descriptive thought, or words or images might be going through her mind. But she will not be thinking a genuine singular thought, and so will not be thinking a thought that she can know, let alone know infallibly. Either way, externalism doesn’t

compromise authoritative self-knowledge and the quasi-Cartesian view of subjectivity that presumes it.

If this is right, then neither the first nor the second kind of case establishes that there is any problem about authoritative self-knowledge that needs explaining in the light of externalism. Let us turn, then, to the third and final kind of case mentioned earlier, in section I. Here there are object-dependent thoughts available for a subject to think, so that she is capable of thinking, in the presence of a suitably situated tiger, a genuine singular thought of the type, “It seems to me that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes.” In this case the problem posed by externalism is that another may be better placed than the subject to know that that subject is indeed thinking a thought with this content because that other knows the facts of biology and Twin Earth, and knows that the subject has not, unbeknownst to her, been transported to Twin Earth. Does this kind of case compromise authoritative self-knowledge and with it the quasi-Cartesian conception?

What the subject infallibly knows in a case like this, taken disjunctively, is either this: it is manifestly the case that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes, or this: it merely seems to me that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes. Not only can she think this thought and know that she is thinking it, but she can also know (if she knows the externally constrained individuation conditions of the content of her thought) which of the two disjuncts obtains. But she may not know this, and further, another may be in a better position than she is to know it. McDowell says that one reason why this may be is that another may know “the layout of [her] subjectivity” better than she herself does. In the case envisaged here, what another knows and the subject herself does not is that she has not, unbeknownst to her, been transported to Twin Earth, where there are pligers but

no tigers. This fact is one about which the subject knows nothing, and so it does not occupy a place in her subjective “layout.”

As we have seen, McDowell takes the authority another may have as a result of externalism to be compatible with the quasi-Cartesian conception and so with authoritative self-knowledge because what the subject infallibly knows is a fact, construed disjunctively – either it is manifestly the case that she is thinking that that tiger has stripes or it merely seems to her that she is thinking that that tiger has stripes; whereas what another knows authoritatively is which of the disjuncts is in question – in this case, that she is indeed thinking that that tiger has stripes. Since the facts with respect to which the two are authoritative are different, the authority that externalism might purchase for another is consistent with the authority that the quasi-Cartesian conception purchases for the subject.

The situation, however, is not as straightforward and unproblematic as this response suggests. It is true that in this case the fact that the subject might infallibly know is different from the fact that another may be better placed than the subject to know, so that the authority of one is consistent with the authority of the other. But the other may not *just* be better placed to know which of the two disjuncts is in question. He may *also* be better placed than the subject to know whether there is a fact, construed disjunctively, available of the kind the subject takes there to be, and, crucially, what that fact is. The authority which externalism purchases for another extends, not just to knowledge of which disjunct obtains, but also to knowledge of the fact, construed disjunctively, itself. And it purchases this for another precisely because that other may be better placed than the subject to know the facts about biology and Twin Earth, and to know that, unbeknownst to the subject, she has not

been transported to Twin Earth.<sup>9</sup> This will remain the case *even if* both the other and the subject know that externalism is true. Another may be better placed than the subject to know this: that it is indeed the case either that she is manifestly thinking that that tiger has stripes or that it merely seems to her that she is thinking that that tiger has stripes. And this –I submit – encroaches on a subject’s authority precisely because externalism is true of such thoughts.

So, inasmuch as McDowell’s attempt to reconcile externalism with authoritative self-knowledge and the quasi-Cartesian conception trades on the claim that the fact about which a subject has authoritative self-knowledge is not the same fact as the one that another may know authoritatively, he is right to say that authoritative self-knowledge

is consistent with the interpenetration of the inner and the outer, which makes it possible for you to know the layout of my subjectivity better than I do in a certain respect, if you know which of those two disjuncts obtains and I do not. (1986: 154)

This is not, however, all the authoritative knowledge another may have with regard to a subject’s thoughts. If externalism is true, another may be better placed than a subject to know that there are indeed two disjuncts, one of which constitutes her thinking that it seems to her that she is thinking that that tiger has stripes. And this undermines the claim, which even the quasi-Cartesian conception endorses, that subjects are authoritative with regard to knowing what thoughts it seems to them that they are thinking. The disjunctive maneuver, while preserving the openness of mind to world that forces rejection of the fully Cartesian conception, does not preserve the authoritative position subjects have with regard to knowing what thoughts it seems to them that they are thinking. Once externalism is in place and the fully Cartesian

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<sup>9</sup> This may look like it has the form of a familiar Cartesian skeptical argument. However, the point here is not that a subject’s knowledge is compromised; it is that her authority is compromised.



position is rejected, a subject's authoritative position, with regard to knowing what thoughts it seems to her that she thinks, is jettisoned. Inasmuch as this is so, McDowell has no defense for his claim that "there is nothing ontologically or epistemologically dramatic about the authority which it is natural to accord to a person about how things seem to him," given externalism.

#### IV A Suggestion

I said earlier that McDowell is a quietist about the phenomenon of authoritative self-knowledge. He has no difficulty accepting the view that there are inner facts, and that these facts are knowable by their subjects in ways that are immune to the sources of error that attend knowledge of facts about the outer realm. But, in the absence of commitment to the "fully Cartesian" conception of the inner, he does not see that there is anything particularly dramatic or in need of explanation with regard to such knowledge. And so he does not see that there is any pressing need for it to be supported by a substantial epistemology.

I have argued that externalism with regard to nature of certain mental contents does pose a threat to the claim that subjects have authoritative self-knowledge, since others can be better placed than they are to know the facts, construed disjunctively, that constitute their apparent thinkings. In the light of externalism, it is deeply puzzling how it could be that:

how things seem to one is a fact, knowable in a way that is immune to the sources of error attending one's capacity to find out about the world around one. (1986: 154)

The problem is to see how it could be that subjects have *any* kind of authoritative self-knowledge of thoughts whose contents are externalistically individuated.

I think that the appropriate conclusion to draw from this discussion is that if externalism is true, then subjects do not have authoritative self-knowledge of those thought contents for which it is true. When it seems to me that I am currently consciously thinking that that tiger has stripes, and I am indeed thinking this, the inner fact to the effect that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes is not one that I authoritatively know. It is not, in this sense: another can be better placed than I am to know whether there is a *tiger* content to constitute that inner fact.

However, there is something important and right about the view that subjects do sometimes have authoritative self-knowledge, and that there is an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others that flows from this. Further, it is something that the Cartesian conception of the epistemology of self-knowledge can help us to see. According to it, at least some contents of subjects' minds are directly or immediately available to their subjects when they are employing them in thoughts of certain kinds. The kinds of thoughts in question here are the *cogito*-type ones – ones in which subjects are currently consciously thinking about their thoughts while thinking them. The kind of epistemic access subjects have to the contents of their thoughts in such cases, in being direct and immediate, contrasts with the epistemic access others have to those contents. When I am currently consciously thinking, and thinking about a thought with a given externalistically individuated content, another may be in a better position than I am to know what content is available for me to think, and so to think about. But that other is not in a better position to grasp, and so to know, the particular content that constitutes the subject matter of the thought about which I am thinking. Put slightly differently, another may be in a better position than I am to know whether there is a *sort* of *de re* sense available to determine, given the context, a specific *de re* sense in the appropriate place in my mind. And another may

be better placed than I am to know what, given the context, that *sort of de re* sense might be. But that other is not in a better position to know, in a particular context, the specific *de re* sense that constitutes the subject matter of my thought, when I am both thinking and thinking about it. When *I* am both thinking it and thinking about it, I have, whereas another does not, a special kind of epistemic access to the content of that thought. Being in that position gives me an epistemic purchase on it that no other has.

What this shows is that there is another direction in which we could – and I think should – be going. When I am currently consciously thinking, say, that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes, while thinking that very thought, the contents of that thought are manifested to me in a peculiarly direct way. My awareness of these contents is not evidence-based. It is not based on inference from anything else. It is not based on my awareness of anything else. Attention alone brings these contents to the forefront of my awareness.

Elsewhere (Macdonald 1995, 1998), I have argued that we can get a firmer grip on this special kind of epistemic access by focusing our attention on cases of knowledge where notions like “direct epistemic access” and “immediate access” have a natural home. One place where they have a natural home is in perception. Consider properties other than contentful intentional ones where the notion of direct epistemic access is generally thought to apply. I know that the table visually present before me is brown, and that it is rectangular, and this knowledge is plausibly understood as being direct, although not baseless. One explanation of how I can know directly that the table is an instance of this particular shape property, or an instance of this particular colour property, is that the instance is presented to me *as* an instance of that property through my sense of sight. I perceive the instance *as* an instance of that

property, and so no evidence is needed to come to know that it is an instance of that property.

This is not true of other properties. Water, for example, is an instance of the chemical structural property  $H_2O$ , but this instance is not manifested to me *as* an instance of that property through one of my senses. In short, certain properties seem to be ones to which we have direct epistemic access because they are observable; whether objects are instances of them can be determined just by unaided observation of those objects.

This is not to say that one can know which observable property is being manifested to oneself on any one occasion just by being presented with an instance of it. One must be capable of recognizing another instance of that property as of that property when presented with it on another occasion, and this requires one to have mastery of the concept of the relevant property. This means that the notion of direct epistemic access is intensional: for one to have direct epistemic access to a color property such as the property, *brown*, it is not sufficient that one sees an instance of that property. One must see it *as* an instance of that property.

Certain features of observable properties characterize their epistemic directness in a way that marks them off from other properties. One is that they are epistemically basic or fundamental to knowledge of objects that instance them. The point is not that grasp of the observable properties of objects necessarily constitutes knowledge of their true nature. Rather, it is that such properties are those by which objects that instance them are typically known in the first instance. Knowing an object through instances of certain properties and not others favors certain ones epistemically.

Another, crucial, feature of observable properties is that they *are* in general as they appear to be when instances of them are presented to normal perceivers in normal circumstances. Again, this is not a point about the natures of the objects that instance the properties but about the properties themselves. The nature of water may be such as to have the chemical constitution H<sub>2</sub>O, but this is compatible with water's instancing certain observable properties that are such that *they* are as they appear to be to normal subjects in normal circumstances.

The point of focusing on the example of observable properties in perception is not to argue that self-knowledge is just like perceptual knowledge. There are clearly important, and fundamental, differences between these two sorts of knowledge. Intentional properties – properties like *thinks that that tiger has stripes* – are importantly different from observable ones. And introspection, as a means by which information about one's own states of mind is made available to oneself, is not perception. For one thing, there is a kind of phenomenology to perception of observable properties, which is lacking in the case of self-knowledge of one's intentional states.

So I am not arguing here that self-knowledge is just like perception. Although I am making use of an observational analogy in order to articulate a position on authoritative self-knowledge, I am not doing so in what might seem to be the obvious way, namely, by appeal to something like an “inner sense.” Rather, I am appealing to more abstract and general features of observation of external things, specifically, features of observable properties, which help to explain our direct and immediate access to them. Because these features are abstract and general, they are not tied to cases of observation alone. Those who appeal to such phenomena as “intellectual experience” or “intellectual intuition” in their accounts of authoritative self-

knowledge may well appeal to such features.<sup>10</sup> My claim is that these two features of observable properties (not: of objects that have these properties) – that they are epistemically basic and that they are in general as they appear when instances of them are presented to normal subjects in normal circumstances – apply to intentional properties in the *cogito*-type cases in a way that can help us to see why subjects, but not others, have direct epistemic access to certain of their thoughts and so have authoritative self-knowledge of the contents that they are thinking. Thinking about those contents while thinking them puts subjects into direct epistemic contact with the contents themselves.

Consider, then, the first feature – that observable properties are epistemically basic or fundamental to knowledge of objects that instance them. When one thinks about one's own intentional state while undergoing it, from the point of view of the reflective thought, one's grasp of the thought reflected upon is first and foremost a grasp of it as a state of a certain contentful type. When I think that I am thinking that that tiger has stripes, my reflective grasp of that thought is as a thought with the content: *that that tiger has stripes*. The point is not that that state cannot be known by means of other properties (intentional or non-intentional); if physicalism is true, every contentful mental state is identical with a physical state – a state with physical properties – and that state is capable of being thought about in physical terms. The point is, rather, that when I *do* think about an intentional state of mine while undergoing that state, I typically think about it as a state with a given content – *that that tiger has stripes*.

Consider now the second feature: that such properties are in general as they appear to be to their subjects. This feature also applies to intentional properties in the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, George Bealer 1999, in his theory of the a priori, and Tyler Burge 1996.

*cogito*-type cases. The reason is that the contentful type by which I grasp my thought when thinking about it while thinking it can only succeed in grasping it if I redeploy the same contentful type in thinking about it that is employed in thinking it.<sup>11</sup> One cannot have a thought of a certain contentful type, succeed in grasping it while thinking about it, and misidentify it. Since to grasp a thought is to grasp its content, to attempt to grasp it by means of a thought of a different contentful type would be to fail altogether to think about that thought.

So one can have authoritative self-knowledge because, in the *cogito*-type cases, one can have direct epistemic access to one's own thoughts in a way in which others cannot. Grasping one's thoughts in terms of their contents, and those contents being in general as they appear to be when they are thought in this way, gives one authoritative knowledge of them.

How is this reconcilable with externalism? Externalism tells us that the contents of our thoughts are individuation-dependent on factors in the environment. So it is possible that, on a given occasion, unbeknownst to me, I may be thinking a *pliger* thought rather than a *tiger* thought. But if this is so, I cannot have authoritative knowledge about the contents of my own thoughts.

But I can have authoritative knowledge, when I am thinking thoughts with the contents that they do indeed have, of the contents that I'm thinking. This is because when I am currently consciously thinking about them while thinking them, I grasp these contents in an epistemically basic and favored way. Another can be better placed to know whether there are contents available for me to think. But since they do not occupy the epistemically favored position with regard to my thoughts that I do

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<sup>11</sup> For more on conceptual redeployment, see Peacocke 1996.

when I am thinking them, they are not better placed to know the contents that **I** am thinking.

So, externalists about thought content can agree that, in a certain important sense, externalism rules out authoritative self-knowledge, and rules it out irrespective of commitment to the “fully Cartesian” conception of the inner. But there is another sense in which it is right to say that externalism does not impugn authority, and this sense is critically important to preserving the common-sense intuition that there is an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others. Ironically, it is the Cartesian conception of subject’s epistemic relation to her own thoughts in the *cogito*-type cases that can help us to see why it *is* right to say this.



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