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## PRIVILEGED ACCESS, EXTERNALISM, AND WAYS OF BELIEVING

**ABSTRACT.** By exploiting a concept called ways of believing, I offer a plausible reformulation of the doctrine of privileged access. This reformulation will provide us with a defense of compatibilism, the view that content externalism and privileged access are compatible.

**KEY WORDS:** anti-individualism, content externalism, direct-reference theory, Millianism, privileged access

### 1. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST COMPATIBILISM

Call the view that content externalism and privileged access are compatible, *Compatibilism*. The two theses in the debate over Compatibilism are usually defined as follows:

Content Externalism = The view that the semantic contents of our thoughts logically or conceptually imply the existence of objects external to the agent.

Privileged Access to Content (PAC) = It is necessarily true that if a person *x* is thinking that *p*, then *x* can in principle know *a priori* that he himself is thinking that *p*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus defined, Compatibilism, seems to have the following absurd consequence. It seems to entail that there are some propositions that would be knowable *a priori* that are not knowable *a priori*. We begin with a familiar Twin Earth character, Oscar. Suppose that Compatibilism is true and that Oscar knows that it is true. Further suppose that he is thinking that water is wet. It seems that Oscar is in a position

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to argue that some external world object exists, purely *a priori*, as follows:

**Oscar's Argument**

- (1) If I am thinking that water is wet, then some external world object exists.
- (2) I am thinking that water is wet.
- (3) Therefore, some external world object exists.

Premise (1) is supposed to follow from externalism. If Oscar knows that externalism is true, then he should be able to reason *a priori* that (1) is true. If PAC is true, then Oscar will know premise (2) *a priori*. But now we have a problem. Oscar couldn't possibly know *a priori* that some external world object exists. It seems that Compatibilism must be false. We could formalize the argument more precisely as follows:

**The Anti-Compatibilist Argument**

- (4) If Content Externalism and Privileged Access are true, then it would be possible for Oscar to know *a priori* that some external world object exists using Oscar's Argument.
- (5) It is not possible for Oscar to know *a priori* that some external world object exists using Oscar's Argument.
- (6) Therefore, Content Externalism and Privileged Access are not both true.<sup>2</sup>

Again, premise (4) is supposed to follow from the fact that if Content Externalism and Privileged Access are true, then Oscar could know both premises of Oscar's Argument *a priori*. Since Content Externalism is a conceptual truth, Oscar can know the first premise *a priori*. The truth of privileged access guarantees *a priori* knowledge of the second premise.

Premise (5) is surely reasonable. Surely, Oscar should not be able to know *a priori* that some external world object exists. So it seems that Compatibilism is false.

I think we can solve this problem. In the next section, I will present a kind of content externalism called *Millianism*,

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as well as a metaphysics of belief that has been used to defend it. A sketch of this theory will reveal a nice solution to our apparent problem.

### 2. WAYS OF BELIEVING

I want to use *ways of believing* to solve our problem, but to show that I am not introducing an *ad hoc* hypothesis, I will briefly explain what ways of believing are and how they are employed, by some, to defend Millianism.

Millianism can be characterized as follows:

- (M1) Words have contents. The content of a name is the object to which the name refers. The content of a predicate is a property or relation.
- (M2) Sentences have contents. The content of a sentence is a proposition, which is also what the sentence semantically expresses.
- (M3) Propositions have constituents. If a sentence S expresses a proposition P, then the constituents of P are the contents of the words that appear in S.
- (M4) If a person assertively utters a sentence, then she asserts the proposition that the sentence expresses. If she believes what she says, then she believes the proposition that the sentence expresses.<sup>3</sup>

Millianism faces certain problems that have come to be called *Frege Puzzles*.<sup>4</sup> Consider the following two sentences.

- (A) Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn.
- (B) Samuel Clemens is the author of Huckleberry Finn.

If Millianism is correct, then (A) and (B) express the same proposition. That seems problematic. It seems obvious that (A) and (B) do not express the same proposition.

While it might be easy to resist that intuition for these simple sentences, the problem seems worse when we consider sentences, like the following, that contain propositional attitude verbs.

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- (C) Sarah believes that Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn.
- (D) Sarah believes that Samuel Clemens is the author of Huckleberry Finn.

While one might simply insist that (A) and (B) express the same proposition, it seems that (C) and (D) clearly express different propositions. Surely, (C) and (D) could differ in truth value. If (C) and (D) could differ in truth value, then they do not express the same proposition. If (C) and (D) do not express the same proposition, then neither do (A) and (B). Millians have a problem.

A nice way to solve this problem is to invoke *ways of believing*. The solution takes belief to be a mediated relation. The belief relation is still a relation between a person and a proposition; however, persons believe propositions *via* some *way of believing*. A person believes a proposition in virtue of standing in some psychological relation to some third thing.

One theory of what *ways* are holds that *ways* are sentence-like mental representations. According to this theory, people believe propositions in virtue of standing in some relation to these representations. Let's call this relation that a person bears to the sentence-like mental representation *the accepting relation*. So a person believes a proposition P by accepting a sentence-like mental representation that semantically expresses P.<sup>5</sup>

Call the combination of this metaphysics of belief with Millianism, *Ways-Millianism*. Ways-Millianism can explain why we have the intuition that (C) and (D) could differ in truth value. Consider Sarah again. She could believe Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn by accepting, say, the mentalese sentence 'Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn.' However, she could fail to accept the mental sentence 'Samuel Clemens is the author of Huckleberry Finn.' We could say that Sarah believes Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn – *in the Twain way*, but fails to believe Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn – *in the Clemens way*. Since Sarah could believe the

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same proposition in one way and fail to believe it in another way, it is easy to see how we might have the intuition that (C) and (D) could differ in truth value. We imagine Sarah accepting a sentence like ‘Mark Twain is the author of Huck Finn’, so we think (C) could be true. However, we think that she could accept that sentence while also accepting the denial of the sentence ‘Samuel Clemens is the author of Huck Finn’, so we think that (D) could be false. However, we are simply mistaken. (C) and (D) do not differ in truth value, but it is easy to see why we might think they could.

I will simply assume that Ways-Millianism is correct. I won’t defend it here.<sup>6</sup> Let’s see how this theory will help us address the anti-compatibilist argument.

#### 3. BACK TO THE ANTI-COMPATIBILIST ARGUMENT

Before addressing The Anti-Compatibilist Argument, I want to make some concessions. First, we could argue that the version of content externalism used in the argument is not supported by Twin Earth thought experiments.<sup>7</sup> However, some do use this version of externalism to motivate the argument, and I am willing to grant it.<sup>8</sup> Second, I am willing to concede that this version of externalism is incompatible with PAC. Perhaps we do not have privileged access to the contents of our thoughts if this version of externalism is true. Even granting all of this, Ways-Millianism gives us a solution to our problem.

If Ways-Millianism is correct, then we should be careful how we formulate the doctrine of privileged access. The thesis could be about one of two things, the contents of our thoughts or our ways of taking those contents. Ways-Millianism gives us the resources to formulate another privileged access thesis, different from PAC, that might be equally (or better) supported by our intuition that we know what we’re thinking in a basic and privileged way. Consider the original formulation of privileged access along with a reformulation that uses ways instead of content.

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Privileged Access to Content (PAC) = It is necessarily true that if a person *x* is thinking that *p*, then *x* can in principle know *a priori* that he himself is thinking that *p*.<sup>9</sup>

Privileged Access to Ways (PAW) = It is necessarily true that if a person *x* is thinking that *p*, then for some mentalese sentence ‘*p*’, *x* can in principle know *a priori* that he himself is thinking\* ‘*p*’.

Let ‘thinking\*’ be a way to express the relation of accepting defined earlier. Let ‘*p*’ be a mental representation that semantically expresses *p*. Note that both formulations are statements about a certain kind of propositional knowledge that we can have *a priori*.

Let’s apply this to our Oscar case to make the difference more clear. Suppose Oscar is thinking that water is wet. According to PAC, Oscar knows *a priori* a proposition like – I am thinking that water is wet. According to PAW, the proposition Oscar knows would be something like – I am thinking\* ‘water is wet’.<sup>10</sup>

Most arguments against Compatibilism assume that PAC must be what we mean when we say things like “We know what we’re thinking in some privileged way”. However, if Ways-Millianism is correct, then having thoughts requires standing in some relation to a mental representation. That extra relation and that representation seem like excellent candidates to be the constituents of the kinds of propositions that we know in some kind of privileged *a priori* way. So, instead of knowing the contents of our thoughts *a priori*, we might only know *a priori* that we bear this other relation to the *ways* that semantically express our thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

So, while it might be plausible to think that content externalism is incompatible with PAC, it is not plausible to suppose that it is incompatible with PAW. The incompatibilist argument considered earlier would not work against a version of Compatibilism that took PAW to be the correct formulation of privileged access.

Recall that *a priori* knowledge includes basic introspective knowledge. Oscar might know that he is thinking that water is wet, but that knowledge will not be basic introspective

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knowledge. The basic introspective knowledge will be knowledge about a mental representation.

When Oscar looks inside his head and says “I am thinking that water is wet”, he has a basic justified belief about the relation he bears to one of his ways of believing. The truth of PAW merely entails that we have justified beliefs about *ways*. It doesn't follow from the conjunction of Oscar's justified basic beliefs and Content Externalism that some external world object exists, because it doesn't follow from the fact that someone stands in relation to some mental representation that there are external objects to serve as the meanings of those representations. Nor does it follow that someone have had contact with speakers who have the concept water. If we interpret the privileged access thesis as PAW, then Oscar cannot know (1) *a priori*, and therefore cannot know *a priori* that some external object exists.

#### 4. OBJECTIONS

One might argue that my proposal commits us to the claim that we cannot know what we are thinking. It doesn't. We can still know what we are thinking; it is just that this knowledge will be based on our basic introspective knowledge of our mental representations. If we know what we are thinking, that knowledge will not be basic introspective knowledge. It will be non-basic inferential knowledge.

However, if we say that, we might wonder if we have really solved our problem. Consider the following two propositions.

- (E) I am thinking that water is wet
- (F) I am thinking\* ‘water is wet’

If someone can know (E) partially on the basis of (F), we might wonder if we can infer (E) from (F) in a way that would still allow us to infer *a priori* that water exists. If one could infer (E) from (F), purely *a priori*, one could still reason *a priori* that water exists.

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We could run another argument. This time let's use Oscar's friend, Grover. Suppose Grover is a Ways-Millian. Assume that Grover introspects in such a way so as to know that he is thinking\* 'water is wet'. Couldn't he, from premises (7) and (8) in the following argument, know that he is thinking that water is wet? From there he could proceed like his friend Oscar and conclude that some external world objects exist.

#### **Grover's Argument**

- (7) I am thinking\* 'water is wet'
- (8) If I am thinking\* 'water is wet', then I am thinking that water is wet.
- (9) Therefore, I am thinking that water is wet.
- (10) If I am thinking that water is wet, then some external world object exists.
- (11) Therefore, some external world objects exist.

I have granted that Grover can know (7) *a priori*. (9) follows from (7) and (8). (9), (10), and (11) simply repeat Oscar's Argument. The crucial issue will be whether or not Grover's justification for believing (8) would be *a priori*. If we could get (8) *a priori*, then it looks like we will have the same problem, and notice that (8) is just an inference from (F) to (E).

I don't think will have an *a priori* justification for (8). Right now Grover does not have enough to infer (E) from (F). But we can fix this by adding that Grover knows the meanings of his terms. If we add that, then we have the following argument to show that Grover can infer (E) from (F)

#### **Grover's Argument from (F) to (E)**

- (12) If Grover (i) justifiably believes Millianism is true, (ii) justifiably believes that he is thinking\* 'water is wet', and (iii) justifiably believes that 'water is wet' means water is wet, then Grover is justified in believing that he is thinking that water is wet.

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- (13) Grover (i) justifiably believes Millianism is true, (ii) justifiably believes that he is thinking\* 'water is wet', and (iii) justifiably believes that 'water is wet' means water is wet.
- (14) Grover is justified in believing that he is thinking that water is wet.

Now we're in a position to see how Grover could infer (E) from (F). (12) is very reasonable. It follows from Millianism that if you're thinking\* that 'water is wet' and 'water is wet' means water is wet, then you're thinking that water is wet. (13) is supposed to be true given how the Grover example is set up. Grover is a reasonable Millian, so he satisfies (i). He satisfies (ii) given PAW, and presumably Grover knows what his terms mean, so he satisfies (iii). So it seems like it should be very easy for Grover to infer (E) from (F).

But it is important to note that in order for Grover to infer (E) from (F) purely *a priori*, Grover must (i) *a priori* justifiably believe Millianism; (ii) *a priori* justifiably believe that he is thinking\* 'water is wet'; and he must (iii) *a priori* justifiably believe that 'water is wet' means that water is wet. Satisfying (i) and (ii) are no problem. Presumably since Millianism is a conceptual truth, one comes to know it *a priori* and so Grover satisfies (i). Given PAW (and the fact that Grover is thinking that water is wet), Grover satisfies (ii). However, I don't think Grover satisfies (iii).

I think if a person justifiably believes that Millianism is true, then for that person knowing what his language means becomes a partially empirical matter. If someone is a Millian, then knowing that 'water is wet' means water is wet will entail having justification for the existence of the referents of his terms. So, one could not be a justifiably believe Millianism and reason from (F) to (E) purely *a priori*. Grover, for example, needs to know certain facts about his language. He needs to know that 'water' means water and 'water is wet' means water is wet. But if Millianism is true and Grover justifiably believes that Millianism is true, then in order to know those linguistic facts, then Grover would need

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some independent empirical reason to think that water existed. According to Millianism ‘water’ doesn’t mean water unless water exists to be referred to. While I think Grover can be in a position to reasonably infer (E) from (F), I don’t think he will be able to do it in manner that entitles him to infer *a priori* that some external world object exists.

Another worry is whether or not ordinary speakers of our language really have *a priori* justified beliefs about some mental representation. I think it is plausible to suppose that they do. Consider Sarah again. Suppose she is considering the same proposition in two ways. Her well indoctrinated Millian boyfriend tries to explain to her that the propositions are not different – that they are actually the same proposition. He then explains to her that this entails that her thoughts are also the same. She says, “That’s stupid. I can see in my head that the one is different from the other. How could they *possibly be the same?*”

It seems that Sarah is right about something, but we need not say that there is a difference in her two thoughts. She knows and detects a difference in something in some unique privileged way. I submit that what she has authoritative self-knowledge of are her ways of taking propositions, not the contents themselves.<sup>12</sup>

If this is correct, then the proposition that Sarah knows is something like – This is different from that. Where ‘this’ and ‘that’ refer to different ways of taking the same proposition. We might wonder what the structure of this proposition is and how Sarah comes to entertain it. If the theory I advocate is correct, then Sarah believes some proposition about her mental representations. That seems pretty mysterious. How does Sarah come to believe a proposition that has as a mental representation as a constituent?

I think there is a plausible way to explain how it is that speakers have justified beliefs about their mental representations. Timothy McGrew offers us a sufficient condition for having a (privileged) justified belief about a thought. We have privileged access to some thought just in case we can refer to it demonstratively through some process of inner ostension.<sup>13</sup>

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Borrowing from McGrew we can identify the structure of the propositions that people believe when they have beliefs about mental representations, and we can explain how speakers come to pick out mental representations and have beliefs about them. Speakers don't need sophisticated theories about mental representations. Speakers have beliefs about their mental representations by formulating and accepting mentalese sentences like "I am thinking *that*" where 'that' picks out a mental representation.<sup>14</sup> When Sarah perceives a difference in her Clemens-thoughts and her Twain-thoughts, when she utters "That is a different thought from that" – her demonstrative references pick out the different mental representations she uses to think about the same guy, not the thought contents.

Some might have this worry. If, as I maintain, the word 'thought' is ambiguous between (i) a relation to between a person and a proposition and (ii) a relation between a person and a mental state, then perhaps we should think that the proposition is picked out by the inner demonstrative reference. When Sarah demonstratively refers to some thought, one might argue that what she picks out is, at least, indeterminate between the content of her thought and her representation. If this is true, then it seems that we should have some additional reason to think that her demonstrative reference picks out a representation and not a content. If we don't have some additional good reason to think that she picks out a mental representation rather than a content, then it seems that we should not hold that she picks out a mental representation. That would be arbitrary.

I think we do have some good *independent* reason to think that Sarah's demonstrative reference picks out a representation. When Sarah bears a relation to a mental representation, she bears a relation to some concrete physical stuff in her head. It seems that this is the thing that she is aware of. The content of her thought is some abstract object. I find it more intuitive to think that her demonstrative reference picks out this physical stuff and not some abstract object.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

It seems obvious that we know what our thoughts are in some privileged way, but we don't need to move from that intuition to the claim that we can know *a priori* what the contents of our thoughts are. The apparent incompatibility of privileged access and externalism can be solved by carefully formulating privileged access so that what we have privileged access to are mental representations and not thought content.

There are a couple of upshots to this proposal. We've preserved at least some of our intuitions about privileged access, but it also seems that Ways-Millianism benefits from this proposal. Ways of Believing have theoretical virtues apart from solving Frege puzzles. In the end, I think I have presented a viable solution to the apparent incompatibility of content externalism and privileged access.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael McKinsey (2002), p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> We see versions of this argument discussed in McKinsey (1991, 2002), Boghossian (1998), and McLaughlin and Tye (1998). The version discussed here is closest in spirit to McKinsey's formulation.

<sup>3</sup> I take the following four theses from Braun (2002), p. 65. In this paper he refers to the view as *Naïve Russellianism*.

<sup>4</sup> For a more developed discussion of Frege's Puzzles see Salmon (1986).

<sup>5</sup> Braun (2001) suggests this theory of ways, although he argues that his defenses of Millianism do not rely on this particular theory.

<sup>6</sup> For a defense of this solution see Salmon (1986, 1989) and Braun (2000, 2001, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin and Tye (1998) take this approach to addressing the anti-compatibilist argument. In this way, their response seems to be two-fold. They argue that no version of content externalism supported by the Twin Earth thought experiments is incompatible with privileged access. They then argue that some anti-compatibilist arguments work with a version of externalism that is not supported by Twin Earth thought experiments.

<sup>8</sup> Boghossian (1998) and McKinsey (2002).

<sup>9</sup> McKinsey (2002), p. 199; It should be noted that this thesis is laid out as though it were a relation. Let's say that for a person to have Privileged Access to Content is for a person to have a justified *a priori* belief in a proposition of the following form 'I am thinking that P' where think-

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ing expresses the belief relation and P is the semantic content of the thing believed. (I may cut this definition of the relation; I've tried to weed it out of the paper; but now I've noticed that it is a phrase that both McKinsey (2002) and McGrew (1995) use).

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that this proposal is very much like a proposal that Brian McLaughlin and Michael Tye gesture at in McLaughlin and Tye (1998), pp. 294–295. McLaughlin and Tye suggest that if content externalism is construed so that the content of a thought is a proposition, then the corresponding privileged access thesis would be too strong. They do not fill out this suggestion much more than that. My aim here is to fill out that proposal.

<sup>11</sup> In this way 'belief' and 'thought' seem to be ambiguous between a content (or proposition) and some mental state or mental representation. Although he no longer holds this view, David Braun (1993) suggests that this might be true.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Tillman and Richard Feldman both brought up the following worry: we have some explaining to do if we're going to say that That-clauses in this case aren't picking out propositions like we normally think they do. My response is this: We'd have to do the same thing to use Ways to explain our intuitions about (C) and (D). In that case, we have That-clauses – but what happens is we mistakenly think that they pick out representations, and if we assume that they pick out representations, then C and D do differ in truth value. I think we mistakenly use That-clauses in this case to pick out the representation and the relation that obtains between us and the representation. We've already agreed that we can be aware of both of these things enough to confuse facts about representations/accepting with facts about propositions/believing.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy McGrew (1995) P. 88. An idea like this is also present in Burge (1988) and is discussed in detail in Frapolli and Romero (2003, p. 140).

<sup>14</sup> We can represent the structure of this proposition as a singular, Russellian proposition. Suppose 'I' picks out Sarah, and 'that' demonstratively refers to a mental representation that we'll call *M1*. We can represent the structure of the proposition as follows: <Sarah, Thinking\*, M1 >.

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