

On Brown Against the Reductio

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Abstract

In *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge* (Brown 2004), Jessica Brown switches camp in the ongoing debate concerning anti-individualism and privileged access. In particular, she argues that anti-individualism is compatible with privileged access without the absurd consequence that we can have a priori knowledge of substantive facts about the world. Like others, she takes reductio-style arguments to be blocked by empirical conditions contained in the principles of anti-individualist content individuation. Unlike others, she offers detailed arguments for the claim that it cannot be known a priori whether these conditions are fulfilled. Brown here relies on the following principle of local reliability:

(LR) A subject S 's true belief that p is knowledge only if, were p false, she would not believe that p .

This principle needs to be supplemented with the relevant belief forming mechanism, however, and does not support conclusions of the required modal force. It also remains unclear why the scenarios Brown takes to show that, for instance, it cannot be known a priori that 'water' names a natural kind, scenarios like Dry or Motley Earth, should even be considered relevant in the context. Moreover, for 'classical' or 'illusion' anti-individualism, the reductio can be made immune against attack by (LR).

1 Introduction

In her recent book, *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge* (Brown 2004)¹, Jessica Brown argues that all varieties of anti-individualism currently on the market are compatible with privileged access to the content of our own

¹All page references are to this work.

thoughts without the absurd consequence that we can have a priori knowledge of substantive facts about the world. This also holds, she submits, for the combination of social and natural kind anti-individualism, the reductio of which she herself formerly championed (Brown 1995, 2001). In this brief rejoinder, I shall exclusively concentrate on the presentation of these issues in Brown's book. And since her arguments for compatibility follow the same pattern in each case, I shall focus on only one of them: natural kind anti-individualism.

Reductio arguments, as brought to fame by McKinsey and Boghossian (cf. McKinsey 1991, 1997, Boghossian 1997), assume anti-individualism and try to derive the supposedly absurd consequence that we can have a priori knowledge of substantive facts about the external world from two premises. The first is that we have privileged access to the content of our own thoughts, for instance the thought that water is wet:

(PA) A subject S can know a priori that she thinks that water is wet.

The second premise spells out the dependence of anti-individualist thought content on empirical fact. The basic idea is this: On the assumption of anti-individualism, there are conditions under which the actual presence of water in S 's environment is necessary for her having the concept of water. Under these conditions, it holds (necessarily) that

(E) If S thinks that water is wet then there is (or has been) water in her environment.

But, the reductio concludes, if (PA) holds, and S can have a priori knowledge of the principles of anti-individualism, for instance by means of philosophical reflection, then she can know (E) a priori and use it to gain a priori knowledge of a substantive fact about her environment: that there is water in it.

Discussion of the reductio has mainly focused on the major premise (E). Among other things, there is controversy about under precisely which, if any, conditions the presence of water is necessary for having the concept *water*. There is also controversy about whether premises of a kind like (E) can be known a priori. It has been argued, for instance, that at most it can be known a priori that if the concept of X is a natural kind concept, then X exists. But whether a concept is a natural kind concept, the argument continues, is an empirical matter, and thus blocks the reductio (cf. Gallois and O'Leary-Hawthorne 1996; McLaughlin and Tye 1998a,b). Brown basically buys into this latter line of defense against the reductio, and in the next section I shall

look at the details of her argument.

2 Local reliability and a priori knowability

Brown does not think that anti-individualism is committed to the general claim that S can have the concept water only if there is (or has been) water in her environment. She does think, however, that there are certain conditions under which the existence of water in her environment is necessary for S 's possession of the concept water: Existence of water, Brown argues, is necessary if S is 'chemically indifferent', that is, "ignorant of the fundamental nature of the relevant natural kind" (275).² Consequently, the following conditional does follow from the principles of anti-individualism alone, according to Brown:

(AI) If S has a concept that names a natural kind k , and she is chemically indifferent, then her environment contains instances of k (cf. 276).

And since (AI) can be known a priori, the following holds, too: "If [S] could know a priori that she has the concept water, that it names a natural kind, and that she is chemically indifferent, she could know a priori that if she thinks that water is wet then her environment contains water" (277).

In Brown 2004, however, Brown argues that S cannot know a priori that 'water' names a natural kind. She is, of course, not the first to arrive at this conclusion but while other authors consider it more or less self-evident, Brown actually offers arguments. To show that S cannot know a priori that 'water' names a natural kind, she invokes a reliabilist principle supposed to govern knowledge:³

(LR) S 's true belief that p is knowledge only if, were p false, she would not believe that p (cf. 277).

Brown then considers scenarios in which it is false that 'water' names a natural kind, scenarios such as Dry or Motley Earth. And she argues that in such "bad cases" (cf. 283), S

²Brown also requires that S "has an atomic concept of that kind, that is, a concept that is not built out of component concepts in the manner of H_2O " (275) but, like her, I shall suppress this in what follows.

³Following Goldman and McGinn, she calls this principle a principle of 'local reliability' (cf. 325, fn. 2) since what is at issue is belief in *a particular proposition* p .

would still believe that ‘water’ names a natural kind. She could correct her view only empirically. Thus, in the actual situation, she does not know a priori that ‘water’ names a natural kind. In general, it is an empirical matter whether a term intended to name a natural kind in fact does so (277).

But (LR), by itself, does not support the conclusion Brown wants, i.e. the conclusion that there is a specific proposition p , that ‘water’ names a natural kind, that S *cannot* know a priori. What (LR) gives us, if anything, is that, in the actual situation, S ’s true belief in p does not constitute *knowledge simpliciter*. A fortiori, that belief does not constitute a priori knowledge either, of course. But it does not follow that S *cannot* know p simpliciter. Nor does it follow that S *cannot* know p a priori.

To see this, we only need to reflect on the fact that on any plausible interpretation, (LR) concerns a belief in p that S has formed *in a particular way* under particular conditions. This way, or mechanism, of forming the relevant belief is what needs to be held steady across (relevant) alternative situations for (LR) to have any plausibility as a reliabilist principle.⁴ But Brown suppresses the belief forming mechanism in her formulation of (LR). And she never tells us how S formed her true belief that ‘water’ names a natural kind.

What Brown really has in mind must, anyway, be a general conclusion holding for *all possible ways* in which S could form such a belief in a situation like the actual: There is *no* possible way in which S could, in a situation like the actual, form a belief that p that would constitute a priori knowledge. Clearly, this is what is required, if (LR) is to play any role in establishing an impossibility claim of the kind Brown is after. Equally clearly, appeal to (LR) alone is insufficient to establish any such modal claim. And Brown hasn’t told us how to fill this lacuna.

One might think this is not too difficult. The claim we are concerned with is an impossibility claim, to be sure, so we do need to establish a negative existential: There is no possible way in which S could form a belief that p , say a belief that ‘water’ names a natural kind, such that that belief would constitute a priori knowledge. But the possibilities the existential quantifier here should be construed as ranging over are fairly limited. What Brown

⁴See Nozick 1981, 179ff as to why reference to ways, mechanisms, or methods of forming beliefs is required. Brown herself seems to be fully aware of this requirement earlier in her book; cf. Brown 2004, ch. 4.

tries to establish is no more, after all, than that *we*, given the cognitive capacities we have here and now, cannot know a priori that *p*. The relevant possible belief forming mechanisms are, therefore, to be restricted to those we, as we actually are, can use to gain a priori knowledge. Let's say these are introspection, philosophical reflection, and inferences from beliefs provided by these. Then it might seem clear that for any belief that 'water' names a natural kind *S* could form by means of these methods in a situation like the actual it holds that these methods would yield a belief with the same content in bad cases.⁵

I would not recommend going down that road, however. For one thing, doesn't it seem at least equally clear that no-one with a priori belief forming mechanisms in good working order could form a belief that 'water' names a natural kind by means of only these mechanisms anyway? In that case, (LR) simply is irrelevant to these considerations.

Moreover, a moment's reflection shows this road to be a very messy one.⁶ There is no consensus on what belief forming mechanisms capable of yielding a priori knowledge are available to us, here and now. Nor is it uncontroversial to assume that beliefs constitute a priori knowledge *only* if formed in a certain manner. And most importantly, we are not, strictly speaking, concerned with (most of) *us* anyway. The dispute concerns the chemically indifferent only, that is, those of us who are ignorant of the fundamental nature of, say, water. *They* can know a priori, the reductio concludes, that there is water in their environment. Restricting the relevant possibilities to those belief forming mechanisms available to the relevant subjects at the relevant times does, of course, prevent the reductio from going through in any case (i.e. whether or not the subjects are chemically indifferent). The trouble is rather that, if we restrict the relevant possibilities in the way described, our subjects *cannot know at all whether 'water' names a natural kind*.

To see this, consider Motley Earth. On Motley Earth, there is no way for a chemically indifferent subject *S* to find out that 'water' does not name a natural kind *while staying chemically ignorant*. Therefore, no matter in which

⁵Something along these lines was suggested to me by an anonymous referee.

⁶As Kripke told us all along. Here's what he says when discussing the idea that a priori truths are truths that *can* be known independently of any experience: "To make this all clear might [involve] a host of problems all of its own about what sort of possibility is in question here." Kripke comes to the conclusion that it "might be best therefore (...) to stick to the question of whether a particular person or knower knows something a priori or believes it true on the basis of a priori evidence" (Kripke 1972, 35).

way *S* actually formed the belief that ‘water’ names a natural kind, *S* would by that method arrive at a belief with the same content on Motley Earth. By the same reasoning as before we are thus led to the conclusion that, if anti-individualism is true, *S cannot know empirically whether a natural kind term names a natural kind.* Intuitively, this is as absurd as the claim that *S* can know a priori that there is water in her environment. And it is precisely the suggested restriction on possible belief-forming mechanisms that is responsible for this absurdity.

This strongly suggests that this restriction gets the modal force of the relevant knowability-claims seriously wrong. And it is very hard to see how to fix this in any any way not hopelessly messy and ad hoc.

3 Relevance

In the context of Brown’s overall defense of anti-individualism, the following problem might be even more serious. In the light of the strategy employed in earlier parts of her book it is not at all clear why consideration of Dry or Motley Earth scenarios should even be considered *relevant* to the question whether *S* can know a priori that ‘water’ names a natural kind. Brown argues earlier that *S* can know a priori that she thinks that water is wet (cf. Brown 2004, ch. 4, sections 9; 11). Dry or Motley Earth scenarios do not undermine the latter possibility, she claims, because these are not normally relevant (cf. esp. 149ff). Why, then, do they undermine the possibility of knowing a priori that ‘water’ names a natural kind?

To be sure, a principle of *local* reliability like (LR) is simply impotent with regard to belief in the proposition *I think that water is wet*, considered in Dry or Motley Earth scenarios. For in such scenarios, this is not a proposition available to be the content of any belief our chemically indifferent *S* could form. But, as Brown acknowledges, local reliability is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition of knowledge. When it comes to considerations of global reliability, however, Dry or Motley Earth scenarios *prima facie* do seem to create trouble for belief in the proposition *I think that water is wet* - as Brown also acknowledges. It is these problems that she then claims can be avoided since Dry or Motley Earth scenarios are not normally relevant. Our question therefore comes down to: If these scenarios are not relevant for considerations of global reliability, why are they relevant for considerations of local reliability? Brown does not explain.

4 Intentions, illusions, and the return of the reductio

Let's get back to Brown's main line of defense against the reductio. She considers the following possible comeback to her attempt at blocking it by means of (LR). A reductionist could reason like this: "Bad cases" like Dry or Motley Earth are those where a concept *intended* to name a natural kind fails to do so. Since *S* can know a priori that she has such an intention, for instance that she intends 'water' to name a natural kind, maybe *S* can, after all, know a priori that 'water' names a natural kind (cf. Boghossian 1997 for such a suggestion). Of course, a priori knowledge of this intention would help the reductionist only if *S* could also know a priori that she is not in a bad case.

In a bad case, the intention that 'water' names a natural kind is frustrated. Anti-individualists these days fall into two camps about what such frustration amounts to: illusion of thought or application of a descriptive concept. According to what I shall call 'classical' anti-individualism, no thought is expressed by a sentence containing an intended natural kind term if there is no relevant natural kind in the environment. Brown calls this the 'illusion view' (cf. 279), since it has been argued that a subject falsely believing there to be such a kind would be subject to illusions of thought. In what follows I shall only be concerned with this 'classical' or 'illusion view'.

For a 'classical' anti-individualism embracing the illusion of thought option, Brown suggests, the following conditional holds and can be known a priori:

(BI) If a chemically indifferent subject *S* intends 'water' to name a natural kind and it's not the case that *S* suffers an illusion of thought, then 'water' names a natural kind (cf. 280).

This cannot be quite what Brown has in mind, however; it certainly does not seem necessary for 'water' to name a natural kind that *S* suffers *no illusion of thought whatsoever*. It's only her 'water'-thoughts that cannot be illusions. These are a bit tricky to specify, however. Allowing ourselves the notion of a mental representation corresponding to the linguistic expression 'water' we could say the following:

(BI') If a chemically indifferent subject *S* intends 'water' to name a natural kind and it's not the case that *S* suffers an illusion of thought whenever

she tokens ‘water’, then ‘water’ names a natural kind.⁷

Predictably, Brown argues that *S* cannot know a priori that (BI)’s antecedent is fulfilled. The reason, again, is supposed to be (LR), this time directed against *S*’s belief that she does not suffer an illusion of thought (whenever she tokens ‘water’). Even in bad cases, Brown argues, *S* would believe that she does not suffer an illusion of thought (whenever she tokens ‘water’), and, therefore, she cannot know this a priori. Again, Brown in effect claims that there is no possible way in which *S* could form such a belief that would constitute a priori knowledge. And again, the argument seems flawed by not supporting the modal force of this conclusion.⁸

And in this case, we don’t have to worry what kind of possibility we are talking about. For now, we can make short shrift with the impossibility claim by providing a counterexample. This means establishing that, on the assumption of anti-individualism, *S* can know a priori that (BI)’s antecedent is fulfilled. As far as Brown’s criticisms are concerned, we thereby provide the materials needed for reconstructing the reductio. Moreover, in this version, it will simply be immune to attack by (LR).

Since Brown anticipates a move quite closely related to the one I am going to suggest, let’s look at her version first. On behalf of the reductionist, Brown considers the following line of argument: The reductio is concerned with what follows on the assumption of both anti-individualism and privileged access. Therefore, a subject *S* can know a priori that she is not in a bad case since that follows from premises whose a priori knowability is not at issue. More precisely, on the assumption of anti-individualism, it follows from

(T1) I think that water is wet,

which *S* can know a priori. Thus, *S* could gain a priori knowledge that ‘water’ names a natural kind by means of the following inference:

⁷Note, that a single ‘water’-thought is sufficient to make (B)’s antecedent true. This is as it should be. On the assumption of anti-individualism, *S* cannot have a single ‘water’-thought unless ‘water’ names a natural kind. This is why it seems plausible to think that the reductio could take off from a single such thought. Moreover, this does not entail that in *S*, no tokening of ‘water’ is an illusion of thought; *S* might be unsuccessful in intending terms other than ‘water’ to name natural kinds. A sequence like ‘water is heavier than phlogiston’ might be used to illustrate this.

⁸Clearly, an analogous argument using (LR) on behalf of the descriptive version of anti-individualism would be equally flawed. As noted above, I don’t think the descriptive view requires such defense as it is not among the targets of the reductio, anyway.

- (T1) I think that water is wet
- (T2) If I think that water is wet, then I am having a thought rather than an illusion of thought
- (T3) I am having a thought rather than an illusion of thought (cf. 287).

Note, that now the way in which *S* forms the relevant belief *is* specified: *S* arrives at belief in (T3) by means of an *inference from (T1) and (T2)*. On this count, there is nothing to complain about when Brown goes on to argue that application of (LR) to *S*'s belief in (T3) shows that it does not constitute knowledge. It does not constitute knowledge, according to Brown, because *S* would believe (T3) even in bad cases. Therefore, she concludes, the inference from (T1) and (T2) to (T3) is *valid, but not knowledge transmitting*. According to Brown, it constitutes one of the counterexamples to closure, and thus transmission of knowledge, the existence of which (LR) entails anyway (cf. 288).

Such a conclusion might seem rather steep. One might be tempted to regard it as at least equally absurd as the possibility of knowing a priori that the environment contains a natural kind – especially in view of the fact that the thought that (T3) is *self-verifying*. Even if we left that aside, (LR) would not establish that *S* does not know (T3), however. For even though the relevant belief forming mechanism is specified, this very mechanism is not available in bad cases: *S*'s belief in (T3) is formed *by inference from (T1) and (T2)*. No such inference is available in bad cases, since in bad cases, (T1) and (T2) are not even among the propositions available as contents for *S*'s 'water'-beliefs.

Moreover, (T3) isn't what's needed, anyway – we didn't want a claim made true by *any thought whatsoever*, but one requiring thinking that water is wet. Here is one:

- (T3') I am having the thought that water is wet rather than an illusion of thought

The thought that (T3') is both self-verifying and requires thinking that water is wet. Moreover, like (T1) and (T2), (T3') is not among the propositions available as contents for *S*'s thoughts in bad cases and, therefore, immune to attack by (LR). If its self-verifying nature confers a priori knowability on (T3'), we now have our counterexample. Alternatively, the following T-inference could be used to arrive at (T3'):

- (T1') I think that water is wet

- (T2') If I think that water is wet, then I am having the thought that water is wet rather than an illusion of a thought
- (T3') I am having the thought that water is wet rather than an illusion of a thought.

This T-inference seems perfectly kosher; its premises can be known a priori and it is both valid and knowledge transmitting. I conclude that even though there might be perfectly good reasons for renouncing the reductio, (LR) is not among them.*

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*I would like to thank Peter Pagin, Åsa Wikforss and Sören Häggqvist for very helpful comments.

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