

## **What Externalists May Not Want to Say About Dry Earth.**

### **A reply to Daniel Z. Korman, 'What Externalists Should Say About Dry Earth'.**

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Externalists are perfectly happy to talk about Twin Earth, but they worry about Dry Earth: A completely dry planet where the inhabitants are under the illusion that there is a clear, transparent, tasteless liquid that flows in rivers and taps to which they confidently apply the term 'water' to. Dry Earth entered the philosophical limelight because of an argument provided by Paul Boghossian, intended to show that the externalist is committed to saying that on Dry Earth 'water' fails to express any concept at all.<sup>1</sup> Boghossian's argument has elicited a variety of responses on the part of the externalists. In his recent paper Daniel Korman defends what he takes to be the proper response.<sup>2</sup>

Korman proposes that the externalist should appeal to special 'default conditionals', conditionals specifying the nature of the concept expressed in the event a term should fail to pick out a natural kind. This allows the externalist to claim both that if 'water' names a natural kind, then the physical nature of the kind determines the concept expressed, and that if the term fails to pick out a natural kind it does express a concept; namely the concept specified by the default conditionals. For instance, Korman suggests, if water turns out to have a disuniform composition, then 'water' expresses a concept that applies to all samples of superficially water-like kinds, such as XYZ. And in the case of Dry Earth the externalist may appeal to the following default conditional:

(C) If in fact there is no water, then 'water' expresses a concept that applies, with respect to all counterfactual situations, to all and only samples with the superficial features that water was believed to have.<sup>3</sup>

The proposal is not new, as Korman notes.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, several versions of it can be found in the literature and it seems to represent the standard strategy among externalists when it comes to accounting for cases where a purported natural kind term fails to pick out a natural kind.<sup>5</sup> These include cases of error and illusions ('phlogiston', 'water' on Dry Earth) as well as cases where a purported natural kind term fails to pick out a compositionally unified kind ('jade', 'air', 'sand', etc). What has not been recognized, however, is quite how radical and problematic a proposal it is.<sup>6</sup>

## I.

Let us start by trying to determine exactly what Korman is saying. There is an initial difficulty concerning default conditional (C). The default conditionals are supposed to reflect our implicit intentions. This means that they cannot contain concepts that are not available to the individual. Since the concept water is not available to the individual on Dry Earth, according to the externalist, (C) cannot be a conditional that applies to her.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, if (C) *is* available to the individual, it will not be applicable. Hence, this particular default conditional cannot do any work in the case of Dry Earth.

Later in the paper Korman shows awareness of this problem. He suggests that on Dry Earth a counterpart of (C) is operative, where the concept of water is replaced by the concept of dwater. The speakers on Dry Earth, he suggests, 'believe that if (despite appearances) there is no dwater, then anything with the superficial qualities they took dwater to have would be dwater.'<sup>8</sup> However, this points to a more serious difficulty. The default conditionals, according to Korman, are supposed to "govern the semantics of the word 'water'", they are supposed to determine the concept expressed by the term.<sup>9</sup> But how can the conditional play this role if it already contains the concept in question? That is, if

the speakers on Dry Earth are to be ascribed the intention above, the concept of dwater must be determined independently of this intention.

As it stands, therefore, Korman's proposal does not even get off the ground. The suggested default conditionals cannot play the role required but are rendered impotent when it comes to the determination of content. Perhaps they can be reformulated? The only possibility, it appears, would be to give the conditionals a metalinguistic formulation, along the following lines:

(C') If 'water' is intended to pick out a natural kind but fails to do so then it expresses a concept that applies, with respect to all counterfactual situations, to all and only samples with the superficial features that speakers employing the term would specify as belonging to the kind they take themselves to be referring to.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike (C), conditional (C') does not fall foul of the objection above, and could therefore play a role in the determination of the concept expressed by 'water'. But now a different worry arises. Is it really plausible to ascribe ordinary speakers this type of complicated metalinguistic intentions? Of course, the intentions need not be explicit, as Korman stresses, but can be ascribed to speakers on the basis of their intuitions about counterfactual scenarios. However, the question is whether it can be assumed that ordinary speakers have intuitions about extreme scenarios, such as Dry Earth, that are sufficiently clear and stable to support the ascription of detailed, metalinguistic intentions of this sort.<sup>11</sup> Dry Earth, after all, involves not merely error about the underlying cause of a set of observable features (as in the case of 'phlogiston') but a pervasive illusion where speakers are deluded also concerning the macrophysical features of their environment. Since intuitions are unstable even in the case of Twin Earth, which is a relatively straightforward scenario, one should expect a much greater uncertainty concerning the semantic implications of a far removed scenario such as Dry Earth.

For the sake of argument, however, I shall leave this worry behind and assume that speakers can be ascribed implicit intentions of the required sort. The question, then, is whether it allows the externalist to give a plausible account of Dry Earth.

## II.

Much, of course, depends on how the externalist thesis is to be understood. For the purposes of his paper Korman construes the thesis as follows:

(E1) One cannot possess natural-kind concepts or refer to natural kinds without having had causal interaction with instances of the relevant natural kind.<sup>12</sup>

Korman argues that since (E1) is a thesis specifically concerning natural kind concepts it does not have anything to say with regard to non-natural kind concepts. The externalist may hold that 'water' on Dry Earth expresses a necessarily vacuous concept, that it expresses an atomic concept with motley application conditions or that it expresses a compound, descriptive concept - all theses are equally compatible with (E1). At one point Korman even suggests that it is open to the externalist to hold that 'one can possess the concept of water even if there turns out not to be any water'.<sup>13</sup> However, as noted above, this cannot be true. Since (E1) states a *necessary* condition for possessing a natural kind concept it excludes the possibility of possessing the concept water without having been in contact with water. This suggestion must therefore be considered a slip on Korman's part.<sup>14</sup>

What is correct is that (E1) does not speak to the case of non-natural concepts. (E1) is a thesis telling us in virtue of what one may refer to a natural kind and possess a natural kind concept and does therefore not tell us anything about the possession conditions for *other* types of concepts. However, the mere claim that (E1) is *consistent* with the suggestion that 'water', on Dry Earth, expresses a concept with motley application conditions

is in itself fairly trivial. Indeed, it makes it a mystery why Dry Earth has been taken to pose a difficulty for the externalist in the first place.

To see why Dry Earth has appeared problematic, we have to go deeper. There are two distinct (but commonly conflated) difficulties concerning externalism and Dry Earth. The first difficulty concerns meaning determination, or *foundational semantics*, the second concerns the semantic value of purported natural kind terms, or *descriptive semantics*. A foundational theory, recall, tells us something about the facts that determine the meaning of a term, the concept expressed. In virtue of what does 'water' have the meaning that it does? A descriptive semantic theory, by contrast, tells us what the semantic value of a term is; for instance, that 'water' expresses a directly referential concept.<sup>15</sup>

Let us first consider the determination problem. If 'water' does express a concept on Dry Earth, what are the facts that determine this concept?<sup>16</sup> Since there is no 'water'-liquid at all on Dry Earth, it is difficult to see how the concept expressed by 'water' could be determined externalistically. There is simply nothing in the relevant external environment to play this role. What, then, could serve the function of determining the concept expressed? Unless the externalist can provide an answer to this question, the conclusion must be that 'water' fails to express a concept on Dry Earth.

Korman's response to the determination problem, in effect, is to suggest that the externalist falls back on *internalism*. According to the relevant default conditional, again, the concept expressed by 'water' on Dry Earth is determined by the descriptions associated by speakers with 'water' (or, better, by the speaker's pattern of holding 'water'-sentences true: 'Water is wet', 'Water is transparent'....). Thus, the concept expressed by 'water' is determined by certain facts about the individual and not externalistically. This response is not incompatible with (E1), as Korman stresses, since that thesis only speaks to the case of natural kind concepts and these are defined as concepts that in fact pick out natural kinds.

However, at the same time it is odd to characterize it as an *externalist* reply to Dry Earth. One of Korman's main goals is to argue against the claim, made by Boghossian and Segal, that his response to Dry Earth constitutes 'a departure from externalism'.<sup>17</sup> The critics of externalism might perhaps be forgiven for assuming that an internalist reply to the determination problem would constitute such a departure.

Moreover, it should be stressed what is involved in making this move. What the appeal to default conditionals implies is that the foundational semantics of a purported natural kind term, such as 'water', depends on the chemical and physical makeup of the world. In other words, whether or not the meaning of 'water' is determined externalistically or internalistically is decided not by the speaker's intentions, but by features in her external environment. This constitutes a radicalization of externalism. On the more familiar externalist picture, the application conditions of a term vary with alternations in the environment. On Korman's picture, the *foundational semantics* of a term varies with the environment. And this raises a metaphysical concern. How can basic semantic facts, such as whether a term has an internalist or externalist semantics, be determined by recondite facts within physics and chemistry? Semantic facts of this sort, one would think, depend on our linguistic practices, on our semantic intentions, etc., and not on the physical make-up of the world. Of course, on Korman's view, intentions do play a role insofar as the default conditionals reflect our intentions. However, as Korman himself recognizes, even if these intentions constitute necessary conditions, they have no say when it comes to determining the actual semantics of the term.<sup>18</sup>

Once (E1) is coupled with a certain view of the *semantic value* of natural kind terms the consequences of appealing to default conditionals are even more radical. This takes us to the second problem mentioned above. Many externalists are committed to the idea that natural kind terms are directly referential and lack all descriptive content. Thoughts

containing natural kind concepts have a 'kind-dependent' content, it is held, much along the lines that proper names are believed to have an object-dependent semantic value.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it is precisely because externalists have endorsed this idea that Dry Earth has appeared to cause such difficulties.<sup>20</sup> After all, if the content of a natural kind term is object-dependent in this strong sense, it seems to follow that if the 'object' goes missing, the term has no semantic value.

Korman employs the same strategy with respect to the semantic value problem as to the determination problem, and appeals to default conditionals: If 'water' picks out a natural kind (such as H<sub>2</sub>O or XYZ) it expresses a directly referential, natural kind concept, whereas if it fails to pick out a natural kind, the term expresses a descriptive concept with motley application conditions along the lines of (C').<sup>21</sup> This implies that not only the foundational semantics of 'water' depends on features in the individual's environment, but also that which descriptive semantics is true of 'water' depends on the environment. When all goes well (as on Earth) 'water' expresses a directly referential, non-descriptive concept, whereas on Dry Earth (and Motley Earth) 'water' expresses a descriptive concept. Our intentions are thus rendered even more impotent. I may intend my term 'water' to express a non-descriptive natural kind concept, and believe that it does, and be wrong - that is, if 'water' fails to pick out a natural kind.<sup>22</sup> It is all left up to the external environment.

Leaving aside the metaphysical worry, it should be clear that this view has problematic epistemological implications. If the semantic value of 'water' depends on the physical constitution of the stuff called 'water', then this semantic value cannot be known a priori. Indeed, it follows that our knowledge of the descriptive semantics of a purported natural kind term is a posteriori in the strong sense of being dependent not merely on empirical investigations but on detailed scientific investigations (and in the case of a radical

illusions, as on Dry Earth, it may well be that *no* investigations could reveal the truth of the matter).<sup>23</sup>

Korman notes that his view implies that 'one is not always in a position to know, solely on the basis of introspection and a priori reflection, whether a given concept has motley or nonmotley application conditions.'<sup>24</sup> However, he dismisses the epistemological problem by appealing to the standard compatibilist idea, first suggested by Tyler Burge, that basic self-knowledge (judgments about our own occurrent thoughts) does not require knowing all of a concept's properties.<sup>25</sup> Whatever one thinks of this move in general, however, it should be stressed what not knowing the 'properties of the concept' means in this context. It is not just that we may not have a priori knowledge of the application conditions of the concept expressed by 'water' (whether the application conditions of water are distinct from those of twater, for instance), but that *we do not know the first thing about the concept* prior to detailed scientific investigations of the environment. Prior to such investigations we do not know whether the concept has any descriptive content or is directly referring which, in turn, means that we do not know anything about its conceptual and logical connections.<sup>26</sup> Thus, if the concept is descriptive it will stand in all sorts of conceptual connections that it would not if it is directly referential. We are of course familiar with the idea that some necessities are a posteriori. According to Korman's account, however, the scope of a posteriori necessity reaches well beyond that of identity sentences. For instance, on this view, it may be that 'Water is wet' expresses a conceptual necessity, but whether that is so or not depends on whether 'water' expresses a directly referential concept or a descriptive one, which, in turn, depends on whether the stuff we call 'water' is compositionally uniform.

Compatibilists, no doubt, will dig in their heels and insist that even if one does not know the first thing about the concept expressed, thoughts of the form *I am thinking with this very thought that p* are self-verifying and hence there is no epistemological

difficulty.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Oscar when Oscar on Dry Earth judges *I am thinking with this very thought that dwater is wet* his judgment is guaranteed to be true. This is not the place to discuss the promise of that familiar strategy, but it is worth noting that even if it is granted that no threat is posed to *self-knowledge* it is a serious question whether the externalist who endorses a posteriori semantics is able to give a plausible account of *reasoning*. If it cannot be known a priori whether a concept is directly referential or has a descriptive content an obvious threat is posed to our ability to detect logical and conceptual relations among our thoughts a priori. This ability, as stressed by Burge, is central to our capacity as critical reasoners and we should hesitate before endorsing a theory of content that undermines it.<sup>28</sup>

Dry Earth, I have argued, poses two distinct problems: The determination problem and the semantic value problem. The externalist can solve these problems by falling back on default conditionals only at the price of rendering semantics radically a posteriori and dependent on the physical constitution of our environment. This may not be what externalists want to say about Dry Earth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Boghossian, "What the Externalist Can Know A Priori", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XCVII (1997): 161-175. Boghossian uses this claim to defend a version of the well-known reductio argument against the view that externalism is compatible with self-

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knowledge. The original reductio argument is due to Michael McKinsey, "Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access", *Analysis* 51 (1991): 9-16.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Z. Korman, "What Externalists Should Say About Dry Earth", *Journal of Philosophy*, CIII (2006): 503-520.

<sup>3</sup> Korman (2007), p. 508.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 518.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Jessica Brown, *Anti-Individualism and Knowledge* (2004), MIT Press: Cambridge Mass; André Gallois *The World Without, The Mind Within. An Essay on First-Person Authority* (1996), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge; Brian McLaughlin and Michael Tye M, "Externalism, Twin Earth, and Self-Knowledge", in Wright, Smith & Macdonald (eds.), *Knowing Our Own Minds*, (1998), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 285-320; Susana Nuccetelli, "Knowing That One Knows What One Is Talking About", in *New essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge* (2003), (ed.) S. Nuccetelli, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass, pp. 169-184.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier versions of this proposal are criticized in Häggqvist & Wikforss, "Externalism and A Posteriori Semantics" (*Erkenntnis* 2007, 67:373-386) and in my "Naming Natural Kinds" (2005), *Synthese*, 145: 65-87.

<sup>7</sup> In the discussion it is assumed that 'water', in English, expresses the concept water (a natural kind concept applying to instances of H<sub>2</sub>O only) and Korman grants this assumption (p. 511).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 512.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 507.

<sup>10</sup> Further difficulties lurk that cannot be discussed here. In particular, it is not clear how this is supposed to apply to the level of thought. Even if a *lingua mentis* is assumed, it is difficult to see how speakers could have intentions directed towards representations on the subpersonal level. For a discussion of related difficulties see Kathrin Glüer, "Brown Against the

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Reductio", in *What Determines Content? The Internalism/Externalism Dispute*, ed. T.

Marvan, Cambridge Scholars Press: Cambridge, (2006): 154-162.

<sup>11</sup> Ned Block and Robert Stalnaker have suggested that we may not be able to settle the application conditions of 'water' in these counterfactual situations merely by appealing to intuitions ("Conceptual Analysis, Dualism and the Explanatory Gap", *Philosophical Review*, CVIII (1999): 1-46, at p. 21). Korman responds by saying that one may replace the appeal to intuitions with an appeal to one's 'preferred epistemic resource' (p. 5059. He adds, however, that he does not believe that anything other than intuition can serve as *evidence* in favor of a particular specification of the application conditions. The latter remark may be true, but misses the point of skepticism about intuitions. The skepticism concerns the very idea that there is a fact of the matter as to what the application conditions are in a given counterfactual scenario. Thus, when Block and Stalnaker suggest that a *decision* is called for, they are not suggesting that such a decision could provide *evidence* one way or the other.

<sup>12</sup> Korman (2007), p. 505. Korman also includes in the definition of externalism an essentialist thesis with respect to natural kinds. Although this thesis no doubt is a presupposition of externalism, it is semantically neutral and perfectly compatible with internalism. I shall therefore focus on thesis (E1).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 518.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Korman himself writes that (E1) 'entails that the inhabitants of dry earth do not have the concept water' (2007, p. 511).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between foundational semantics and descriptive semantics see Robert Stalnaker, "Reference and Necessity", in *A Companion to Philosophy of Language*, B. Hale & C. Wright eds. Oxford: Blackwell: 534-554.

<sup>16</sup> This problem is pressed by Boghossian (1997) *op cit*.

<sup>17</sup> Korman (2007), p. 504.

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<sup>18</sup> Korman notes that there is a sense in which "semantic intentions do not, by themselves, determine the content of 'water'" since, he says, they leave it up to the world to determine which default conditional is the operative one (p. 509).

<sup>19</sup> For a formulation of this thesis, see for instance McLaughlin & Tye 1998, p. 292. It is not clear that the parallel with proper names holds up, however, since kinds are abstract objects. I shall have to leave this complication be here, but discuss it at some length in 'Semantic Externalism and Psychological Externalism' (*Philosophy Compass* 2008, 3/1: 158-181).

<sup>20</sup> For example, McKinsey's reductio argument is based on the assumption that natural kind terms have a semantic value that is in this sense kind-dependent. For a recent discussion, see McKinsey, "Forms of Externalism and Privileged Access" (2002), *Philosophical Perspectives* 16: 199-224.

<sup>21</sup> Following a proposal made by Peter Ludlow, Korman also suggests (p. 519) that the same strategy could be applied in the case of empty proper names, such that ordinary proper names refer directly while empty names have descriptive content (see Ludlow, "Externalism, Logical Form and Linguistic Intentions", in A Barber (ed.), *Epistemology of Language* (2003), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 399-414). Ludlow's proposal is criticized in Häggqvist & Wikforss 2007, *op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Notice that the traditional idea has been that whether or not a term is used as a directly referential term depends on our intentions. For instance, in his discussion of rigidity Kripke stresses that the kind of rigidity he is interested in is 'de jure rigidity', where a designator is *stipulated* to be rigid (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (1980), Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass: at p. 21).

<sup>23</sup> It also requires, of course, that science is sufficiently developed. For thousands of years, people took 'jade' to pick out a mineral with a unified nature, and it is a contingent fact that

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science developed to the point that this assumption could be shown false. For a discussion of this, see Häggqvist & Wikforss 2007, *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Korman (2007), pp. 518-519.

<sup>25</sup> See "Individualism and Self-Knowledge" (1980), *Journal of Philosophy* 85, 649-663.

<sup>26</sup>The problem is not, therefore, just that the 'internal syntax' of the concept cannot be known a priori (whether the concept is atomic or composite) but that its semantics cannot be known a priori.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance Brown 2004, *op.cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> See Burge "Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge" (1996), *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (96): 91-116. I discuss this in some detail in 'Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of Content' (forthcoming in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 2008). The problem, of course, does not just apply to second order reasoning of the sort discussed by Burge, but also to first-order reasoning. If the individual does not know the conceptual and logical connections among her thoughts, she will make all sorts of simple reasoning errors. For a discussion of this see Akeel Bilgrami, "A Trilemma for Redeployment" (2003), *Philosophical Issues* 13: 22-30.

<sup>29</sup> Thanks to Kathrin Glüer, Sören Häggqvist and Michael McKinsey for very helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper.