

Individualism and Self-Knowledge

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## INDIVIDUALISM AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE\*

THE problem I want to discuss derives from the juxtaposition of a restricted Cartesian conception of knowledge of one's own thoughts and a nonindividualistic conception of the individuation of thoughts. Both conceptions are complex and controversial. But I shall not explain them in detail, much less defend them. I shall explicate them just enough to make the shape of the problem vivid. Then I shall say something about solving the problem.

Descartes held that we know some of our propositional mental events in a direct, authoritative, and not merely empirical manner. I believe that this view is correct. Of course, much of our self-knowledge is similar to the knowledge of others' mental events. It depends on observation of our own behavior and reliance on others' perceptions of us. And there is much that we do not know, or even misconstrue, about our own minds. Descartes tended to underrate these points. He tended to overrate the power of authoritative self-knowledge and its potential for yielding metaphysical conclusions. Characterizing the phenomenon that interested Descartes is a substantial task. I shall not take on this task here. I think, however, that Descartes was right to be impressed with the directness and certainty of some of our self-knowledge. This is the point I shall rely on.

Descartes's paradigm for this sort of knowledge was the  *cogito* . The paradigm includes not only this famous thought, but fuller versions of it—not merely 'I am now thinking', but 'I think (with this very thought) that writing requires concentration' and 'I judge (or doubt) that water is more common than mercury'. This paradigm goes further toward illuminating knowledge of our propositional attitudes than has generally been thought. But I note it here only to emphasize that Descartes's views about the specialness of some self-knowledge are not merely abstract philosophical doctrine. It is certainly plausible that these sorts of judgments or thoughts constitute knowledge, that they are not products of ordinary empirical investigation, and that they are peculiarly direct and authoritative. Indeed, these sorts of judgments are self-verifying in an obvious way: making these judgments itself makes them true. For mnemonic purposes, I shall call such judgments  *basic self-knowledge* .

\* To be presented in an APA symposium on Individuation and Self-Knowledge, December 30, 1988. Donald Davidson will comment; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 664/5. Substantially this paper was the Nelson Lecture, University of Michigan, February 1986. I benefited from the occasion.

Let us turn from knowledge of one's thoughts to individuation of one's thoughts. My view on this matter is that many thoughts are individuated nonindividualistically: individuating many of a person or animal's mental kinds—certainly including thoughts about physical objects and properties—is necessarily dependent on relations that the person bears to the physical, or in some cases social, environment. This view is founded on a series of thought experiments, which I shall assume are familiar.<sup>1</sup> Their common strategy is to hold constant the history of the person's bodily motion, surface stimulations, and internal chemistry. Then, by varying the environment with which the person interacts while still holding constant the molecular effects on the person's body, one can show that some of the person's thoughts vary. The details of the thought experiments make it clear that the variation of thoughts is indicative of underlying principles for individuating mental kinds. The upshot is that which thoughts one has—indeed, which thoughts one can have—is dependent on relations one bears to one's environment.

Our problem is that of understanding how we can know some of our mental events in a direct, nonempirical manner, when those events depend for their identities on our relations to the environment. A person need not investigate the environment to know what his thoughts are. A person does have to investigate the environment to know what the environment is like. Does this not indicate that the mental events are what they are independently of the environment?

By laying aside certain contrary elements in Descartes's views, one can reconstruct a tempting inference to an affirmative answer from his conception of self-knowledge.

In reflecting on the demon thought experiment, one might think that, since we can know our thoughts authoritatively, while doubting whether there is any physical world at all, the natures of our thoughts—our thought kinds—must be independent of any relation to a physical world. A parallel inference is presupposed in Descartes's discussion of the real distinction between mind and body. In *Meditations* VI, he argues that the mind can exist independently of any physical entity. He does so by claiming that he has a "clear and distinct idea" of himself as only a thinking and unextended thing,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my "Individualism and the Mental," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, IV (1979): 73–121; "Other Bodies," in *Thought and Object*, Andrew Woodfield, ed. (New York: Oxford, 1982); "Individualism and Psychology," *The Philosophical Review*, XCV, 1 (1986): 3–45; "Cartesian Error and the Objectivity of Perception," in *Subject, Thought, and Context*, Philip Pettit and John McDowell, eds. (New York: Oxford, 1986); "Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind," this JOURNAL, LXXXIII, 12 (December 1986): 697–720.

and a “clear and distinct idea” of body as only an extended and unthinking thing. He claims that it follows that the mind that makes him what he is can exist independently of any physical body. The argument also occurs in *Principles I, LX*:

. . . because each one of us is conscious [through clear and distinct ideas] that he thinks, and that in thinking he can shut off from himself all other substance, either thinking or extended, we may conclude that each of us . . . is really distinct from every other thinking substance and from every corporeal substance.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes also believed that he had “clear and distinct ideas” of his thoughts. One might argue by analogy that, since one can “shut off” these thoughts from all corporeal substance, they are independent for their natures from physical bodies in the environment, and presumably from other thinkers. This line of argument implies that knowledge of one’s own thoughts guarantees the truth of individualism.<sup>3</sup>

The root mistake here has been familiar since Arnauld’s reply. It is that there is no reason to think that Descartes’s intuitions or self-knowledge give him sufficient clarity about the nature of mental events to justify him in claiming that their natures are independent of relations to physical objects. Usually, this point has been made against Descartes’s claim to have shown that mental events are independent of a person’s body. But it applies equally to the view that mental kinds are independent of the physical environment. One can know what one’s mental events are and yet not know relevant general facts about the conditions for individuating those events. It is simply not true that the cogito gives us knowledge of the individuation conditions of our thoughts which enables us to “shut off” their individuation conditions from the physical environment. Our thought experiments, which have directly to do with conditions for individuation, refute the independence claim.<sup>4</sup>

It is one thing to point out gaps in inferences from self-knowledge to individualism. It is another to rid oneself of the feeling that there is a puzzle here. Why is our having nonempirical knowledge of our

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, Haldane and Ross trans. (New York: Dover, 1955), pp. 243/4.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this and other features of the inference in “Cartesian Error and the Objectivity of Perception.” See also my “Perceptual Individualism and Authoritative Self-Knowledge,” in *Contents of Thought*, Robert Grimm and Daniel Merrill, eds. (Tucson: Arizona UP, 1988). I now think that Descartes’s views have more anti-individualistic elements than I realized in writing those articles. I hope to discuss these matters elsewhere.

thoughts not impugned by the fact that such thoughts are individuated through relations to an environment that we know only empirically?

Let us assume that our thoughts about the environment are what they are because of the nature of entities to which those thoughts are causally linked. According to our thought experiments, a person with the same individualistic physical history could have different thoughts if the environment were appropriately different. One senses that such a person could not, by introspection, tell the difference between the actual situation (having one set of thoughts) and the counterfactual situation (having another).

This intuition must be articulated carefully. What do we mean by 'introspection'? In each situation, the person knows what his thoughts are; and in each situation the thoughts are different. If 'introspection' were explicated in terms of self-knowledge, there would be an introspectible difference.

Certainly, if one were stealthily shifted back and forth between actual situations that modeled the counterfactual situations, one would not notice some feature in the world or in one's consciousness which would tell one whether one was in the "home" or the "foreign" situation. But this remark does not capture the idea that the two lives would feel the same. The thoughts would not switch as one is switched from one actual situation to another twin actual situation. The thoughts would switch only if one remained long enough in the other situation to establish environmental relations necessary for new thoughts. So quick switching would not be a case in which thoughts switched but the introspection remained the same.

But slow switching could be such a case. Suppose that one underwent a series of switches between actual earth and actual twin earth so that one remained in each situation long enough to acquire concepts and perceptions appropriate to that situation. Suppose occasions where one is definitely thinking one thought, and other occasions where one is definitely thinking its twin.<sup>5</sup> Suppose also that the switches are carried out so that one is not aware that a switch is occurring. The continuity of one's life is not obviously disrupted. So, for example, one goes to sleep one night at home and wakes up in

<sup>5</sup> Of course, there can arise difficult questions about whether one is still employing thoughts from the departed situation or taking over the thoughts appropriate to the new situation. I think that general principles govern such transitions, but such principles need not sharply settle all borderline cases. Insofar as one finds problems associated with actual switches distracting, one could carry out the objection I am articulating in terms of counterfactual situations.

twin home in twin bed—and so on. (Your standard California fantasy.) Now suppose that, after decades of such switches, one is told about them and asked to identify when the switches take place. The idea is that one could not, by making comparisons, pick out the twin periods from the “home” periods.

I grant these ideas. The person would have no signs of the differences in his thoughts, no difference in the way things “feel.” The root idea is that at least some aspects of one’s mental life are fixed by the chemical composition of one’s body. One might call these aspects *pure phenomenological feels*. If one were uncomfortable with this notion, one could explicate or replace it in terms of an abstraction from the person’s inability to discriminate between different mental events under the stated switching situations.

The upshot of all this is that the person would have different thoughts under the switches, but the person would not be able to compare the situations and note when and where the differences occurred. This point easily, though I think mistakenly, suggests the further point that such a person could not know what thoughts he had unless he undertook an empirical investigation of the environment which would bring out the environmental differences. But this is absurd. It is absurd to think that, to know which thoughts we think, we must investigate the empirical environment in such a way as to distinguish our actual environment from various twin environments.

In basic self-knowledge, a person does individuate his thoughts in the sense that he knows the thought tokens as the thought tokens, and types, that they are. We know which thoughts we think. When I currently and consciously think that water is a liquid, I typically know that I think that water is a liquid. So much is clear.

How can one individuate one’s thoughts when one has not, by empirical methods, discriminated the empirical conditions that determine those thoughts from empirical conditions that would determine other thoughts?

It is uncontroversial that the conditions for thinking a certain thought must be presupposed in the thinking. Among the conditions that determine the contents of first-order empirical thoughts are some that can be known only by empirical means. To think of something as water, for example, one must be in some causal relation to water—or at least in some causal relation to other particular substances that enable one to theorize accurately about water. In the normal cases, one sees and touches water. Such relations illustrate the sort of conditions that make possible thinking of something as water. To know that such conditions obtain, one must rely on empiri-

cal methods. To know that water exists, or that what one is touching is water, one cannot circumvent empirical procedures. But to *think* that water is a liquid, one need not *know* the complex conditions that must obtain if one is to think that thought. Such conditions need only be presupposed.

Now let us turn to knowledge of one's thoughts. Knowing what one is thinking when one has thoughts about physical entities presupposes some of the same conditions that determine the contents of the empirical thoughts one knows one is thinking. This is a result of the second-order character of the thoughts. A knowledgeable judgment that one is thinking that water is a liquid must be grounded in an ability to think that water is a liquid.

When one knows that one is thinking that *p*, one is not taking one's thought (or thinking) that *p* merely as an object. One is thinking that *p* in the very event of thinking knowledgeably that one is thinking it. It is thought and thought about in the same mental act. So any conditions that are necessary to thinking that *p* will be equally necessary to the relevant knowledge that one is thinking that *p*. Here again, to think the thought, one need not know the enabling conditions. It is enough that they actually be satisfied.

Both empirical thoughts and thinking that one is thinking such thoughts presuppose conditions that determine their contents. In both cases, some of these conditions can be known to be satisfied only by empirical means. Why do these points not entail that one cannot know that one is thinking that such and such unless one makes an empirical investigation that shows that the conditions for thinking such and such are satisfied? The answer is complex, but it can be seen as a series of variations on the point that one must start somewhere.

It is helpful in understanding self-knowledge to consider parallel issues regarding perceptual knowledge. It is a fundamental mistake to think that perceptual knowledge of physical entities requires, as a precondition, knowledge of the conditions that make such knowledge possible. Our epistemic right to our perceptual judgments does not rest on some prior justified belief that certain enabling conditions are satisfied. In saying that a person knows, by looking, that there is food there, we are not required to assume that the person knows the causal conditions that make his perception possible. We certainly do not, in general, require that the person has first checked that the light coming from the food is not bent through mirrors, or that there is no counterfeit food in the vicinity. We also do not require that the person be able to recognize the difference between

food and every imaginable counterfeit that could have been substituted.

In fact, it is part of our common conception of the objectivity of perception that there is no general guarantee that the perceiver's beliefs, dispositions, and perceptions could in every context suffice to discriminate the perceived object from every possible counterfeit. The possibility of unforeseeable misperceptions and illusions is fundamental to objectivity. So the very nature of objective perception insures that the perceiver need not have a perfect, prior mastery over the conditions for his perceptual success.

This point is obvious as applied to common practice. But it is the business of philosophy and the pleasure of skepticism to question common practice. My discussion of knowledge and individualism has proceeded on the unargued assumption that skepticism is mistaken. Granted this assumption, the point that perceptual knowledge does not require knowledge of its enabling conditions is obvious.

I shall not overburden this essay with an attempt to disarm skepticism. But it is worth noting that nearly all currently defended responses to skepticism, other than transcendental ones, agree in denying that perceptual knowledge must be justified by separately insuring that the enabling conditions hold and the skeptic's defeating conditions do not hold.<sup>6</sup> And since transcendental responses provide at most general guarantees against skepticism, the only tenable responses, which I know of, that attempt to justify particular percep-

<sup>6</sup> This remark applies to reliabilist theories, Moorean theories that insist on the directness of perception, Quinean theories that attempt to show that the skeptic's doubt is covertly a bad empirical doubt, and Carnapian theories that attempt to show that the skeptic's question is somehow irrelevant to actual empirical claims. The words 'first' and 'separately' are crucial in my formulations. As against some reliabilist views that try to block skepticism by denying closure principles, I think that we can know that no demon is fooling us. But we know this by inferring it from our perceptual knowledge.

Several philosophers have thought that anti-individualism, combined with the view that we are authoritative about what thoughts we think, provides a "transcendental" response to skepticism. Cf. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York: Cambridge, 1981). Putnam's argument is criticized by Anthony L. Brueckner, "Brains in a Vat," this JOURNAL, LXXXIII, 3 (March 1986): 148-167. I agree with Brueckner that Putnam's arguments do not do much to undermine skepticism. But Brueckner seems to hold that, if anti-individualism and the authority of self-knowledge are accepted, one would have an antiskeptical argument. He suggests that the assumption of anti-individualism undercuts the assumption of authoritative self-knowledge. I do not accept this suggestion. I believe, however, that there is no easy argument against skepticism from anti-individualism and authoritative self-knowledge. This is a complicated matter best reserved for other occasions.



tual knowledge claims in the face of skepticism take this route. I think that it is the right route.

I have maintained that perceptual knowledge of physical objects does not presuppose that one has first checked to insure that the background enabling conditions are fulfilled. The same point applies to knowledge of one's own mental events, particularly knowledge of the sort that interested Descartes. Such knowledge consists in a reflexive judgment which involves thinking a first-order thought that the judgment itself is about. The reflexive judgment simply inherits the content of the first-order thought.

Consider the thought, 'I hereby judge that water is a liquid'. What one needs in order to think this thought knowledgeably is to be able to think the first-order, empirical thought (that water is a liquid) and to ascribe it to oneself, simultaneously. Knowing one's thoughts no more requires separate investigation of the conditions that make the judgment possible than knowing what one perceives.

One knows one's thought to be what it is simply by thinking it while exercising second-order, self-ascriptive powers. One has no "criterion," or test, or procedure for identifying the thought, and one need not exercise comparisons between it and other thoughts in order to know it as the thought one is thinking. Getting the "right" one is simply a matter of thinking the thought in the relevant reflexive way. The fact that we cannot use phenomenological signs or empirical investigation to discriminate our thoughts from other thoughts that we might have been thinking if we had been in a different environment in no way undermines our ability to know what our thoughts are. We "individuate" our thoughts, or discriminate them from others, by thinking those and not the others, self-ascriptively. Crudely put, our knowledge of our own thoughts is immediate, not discursive. Our epistemic right rests on this immediacy, as does our epistemic right to perceptual beliefs. For its justification, basic self-knowledge in no way needs supplementation from discursive investigations or comparisons.<sup>7</sup>

So far I have stressed analogies between basic self-knowledge and perceptual belief. But there are fundamental differences. A requirement that, to know what thoughts we are thinking, we must be able first to discriminate our thoughts from twin thoughts is, in my view, even less plausible than the analogous position with regard to perceptual knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> I shall not develop the issue of one's epistemic right to one's authoritative self-ascriptions here. It is an extremely complex issue, which deserves separate attention.

Why? In developing an answer to this question, I want to dwell on some fundamental ways in which perceptual knowledge of physical entities differs from the sort of self-knowledge that we have been featuring. We commonly regard perceptual knowledge as *objective*. For our purposes, there are two relevant notions of objectivity. One has to do with the relation between our perceptions and the physical entities that are their objects. We commonly think that there is no necessary relation between any one person's abilities, actions, thoughts, and perceptions up to and including the time of a particular perception, on one hand, and the natures of those entities which that person perceptually interacts with at that time, on the other. On any given occasion, our perceptions could have been misperceptions. The individual physical item that one perceptually interacts with at any given time is fundamentally independent from any one person's perceptions—and conceptions. The nature of the physical entity could have been different even while one's perceptual states, and other mental states, remained the same.

This fact underlies a normative point about perception. We are subject to certain sorts of possible errors about empirical objects—misperceptions and hallucinations that are “brute.” Brute errors do not result from any sort of carelessness, malfunction, or irrationality on our part. A person can be perceptually wrong without there being anything wrong with him. Brute errors depend on the independence of physical objects' natures from how we conceive or perceive them, and on the contingency of our causal relations to them. The possibility of such errors follows from the fact that no matter what one's cognitive state is like (so, no matter how rational or well-functioning one is) one's perceptual states could in individual instances fail to be veridical—if physical circumstances were sufficiently unfortunate.

There is a second sense in which perceptual knowledge is objective. This sense bears on the relation between one person's perceptions of an object and other persons' perceptions of the same object. The idea is that perceptual knowledge, like all other empirical knowledge, is impersonal. Any observer could have been equally well placed to make an observation. Others could have made an observation with the same type of presentation of the scene, if they had been in the same position at the relevant time. And this possible observation could have had the same justificatory status as the original observation. Even though empirical commitments must be made by persons, nothing relevant to the justification of any empirical commitment regarding the physical world has anything essentially to do with any particular person's making the commitment.

The paradigmatic cases of self-knowledge differ from perceptual knowledge in both of these respects. To take the first: in the case of cogito-like judgments, the object, or subject matter, of one's thoughts is not contingently related to the thoughts one thinks about it. The thoughts are self-referential and self-verifying. An error based on a gap between one's thoughts and the subject matter is simply not possible in these cases. When I judge: I am thinking that writing requires concentration, the cognitive content that I am making a judgment about is self-referentially fixed by the judgment itself; and the judgment is self-verifying. There is a range of cases of self-knowledge which extend out from this paradigm. I think that, in all cases of authoritative knowledge, brute mistakes are impossible. All errors in matters where people have special authority about themselves are errors which indicate something wrong with the thinker. Dealing with the whole range requires subtlety. But the point as applied to what I take to be the basic cases is straightforward. No errors at all are possible in strict cogito judgments; they are self-verifying.<sup>8</sup>

The paradigmatic cases of self-knowledge also differ from perceptual knowledge in that they are essentially personal. The special epistemic status of these cases depends on the judgments' being made simultaneously from and about one's first-person point of view. The point of view and time of the judgment must be the same as that of the thought being judged to occur. When I judge: I am thinking that writing requires concentration, the time of the judgment and that of the thought being judged about are the same; and the identity of the first-person pronouns signals an identity of point of view between the judge and the thought being judged about. In all cases of authoritative self-knowledge, even in those cases which are not "basic" in our sense, it is clear that their first-person character is fundamental to their epistemic status.

These differences between perceptual knowledge and authoritative self-knowledge ground my claim that it is even less plausible than

<sup>8</sup> Mistakes about the *res in de re* judgments are not counterexamples to the claim that basic cogito-like judgments are self-verifying (hence infallible). Suppose I judge: I am thinking that my aunt is charming; and suppose that the person that I am judging to be charming is not my aunt (I have some particular person in mind). It is true that I am making a mistake about the identity of the person thought about; I have no particular authority about that, or even about her existence. But I am not making a mistake about what I am thinking about that person; there is no mistake about the intentional act and intentional content of the act. Authority concerns those aspects of the thought which have intentional (aboutness) properties. For me, those are the only aspects of the content of a thought.

it is in the case of perceptual knowledge to think that basic self-knowledge requires, as a precondition, knowledge of the conditions that make such knowledge possible.

Let us think about the difference as regards objectivity in the relation to an object. In the case of perceptual knowledge, one's perception can be mistaken because some counterfeit has been substituted. It is this possibility which tempts one into the (mistaken) view that, to have perceptual knowledge, one must first know something that rules out the possibility of a counterfeit. But in the cases of the cogito-like self-verifying judgments there is no possibility of counterfeits. No abnormal background condition could substitute some other object in such a way as to create a gap between what we think and what we think about. Basic self-knowledge is self-referential in a way that insures that the object of reference just is the thought being thought. If background conditions are different enough so that there is another object of reference in one's self-referential thinking, they are also different enough so that there is another thought. The person would remain in the same reflexive position with respect to this thought, and would again know, in the authoritative way, what he is thinking.

For example, imagine a case of slow switching between actual home and actual twin-home situations. In the former situation, the person may think "I am thinking that water is a liquid." In the latter situation, the person may think "I am thinking that twater is a liquid." In both cases, the person is right and as fully justified as ever. The fact that the person does not know that a switch has occurred is irrelevant to the truth and justified character of these judgments. Of course, the person may learn about the switches and ask "Was I thinking yesterday about water or twater?"—and not know the answer. Here knowing the answer may sometimes indeed depend on knowing empirical background conditions. But such sophisticated questions about memory require a more complex story. If a person, aware of the fact that switching has occurred, were to ask "Am I now thinking about water or twater?", the answer is obviously "both." Both concepts are used. Given that the thought is fixed and that the person is thinking it self-consciously, no new knowledge about the thought could undermine the self-ascription—or therefore its justification or authority.

In basic self-knowledge, one simultaneously thinks through a first-order thought (that water is a liquid) and thinks about it as one's own. The content of the first-order (contained) thought is fixed by nonindividualistic background conditions. And by its reflexive, self-

referential character, the content of the second-order judgment is logically locked (self-referentially) onto the first-order content which it both contains and takes as its subject matter. Since counterfeit contents logically cannot undermine such self-knowledge, there should be no temptation to think that, in order to have such knowledge, one needs to master its enabling conditions.

The view I constructed on Descartes runs contrary. On that view, since basic self-knowledge is more certain than perceptual knowledge, it is more imperative that one be master of all its enabling conditions. One temptation toward this sort of reasoning may derive from construing self-knowledge as a perfected perceptual knowledge. If one thinks of one's relation to the subject matter of basic self-knowledge on an analogy to one's relation to objects of empirical investigation, then the view that one's thoughts (the subject matter) are dependent for their natures on relations to the environment will make it appear that one's knowledge of one's thoughts cannot be any more direct or certain than one's knowledge of the environment. If one begins by thinking of one's thoughts as objects like physical objects, except that one cannot misperceive or have illusions about them, then to explicate authoritative self-knowledge, one makes one of two moves. Either one adds further capacities for ruling out the possible sources of misperception or illusion in empirical perception, or one postulates objects of knowledge whose very nature is such that they cannot be misconstrued or misconceived. In the first instance, one grants oneself an omniscient faculty for discerning background conditions whose independence from us, in the case of perceptual knowledge, is the source of error. In the second instance, one imagines objects of thought (propositions that can be thought only if they are completely understood, or ideas whose *esse* is their *percipi*) whose natures are such that one cannot make any mistakes about them—objects of thought which one can “see” from all sides at once. In either case, one takes oneself to have ultimate insight into the natures of one's thoughts.

This line of reasoning is deeply misconceived. One need only make it explicit to sense its implausibility. The source of our strong epistemic right, our justification, in our basic self-knowledge is not that we know a lot about each thought we know we have. It is not that we can explicate its nature and its enabling conditions. It is that we are in the position of thinking those thoughts in the second-order, self-verifying way. Justification lies not in the having of supplemental background knowledge, but in the character and function of the self-evaluating judgments.

Let us turn to the point that self-knowledge is personal. The view that anti-individualism is incompatible with authoritative self-knowledge is easily engendered by forgetting the essentially first-person character of self-knowledge. We switch back and forth between thinking our thoughts and thinking about ourselves from the point of view of another person who knows more about our environment than we do. This is a key to Descartes's skeptical thought experiments. And it would not be surprising if he tended to think about self-knowledge in such a way as to give it a sort of omniscience from the third-person point of view—in order to protect the first-person point of view from the fallibilities to which impersonal or third-person judgments (especially empirical judgments) are prone. Since we are not omniscient about empirical matters, it is natural to reduce the scope of the relevant third-person perspective so that the character of one's thoughts is independent of an environment about which we cannot be omniscient. Individualism ensues.

To illustrate the train of thought in a more concrete way: we think that we are thinking that water is a liquid. But then, switching to a third-person perspective, we imagine a situation in which the world is not as we currently think it is—a situation, say, in which there is no water for us to interact with. We take up a perspective on ourselves from the outside. Having done this, we are easily but illegitimately seduced into the worry that our original first-person judgment is poorly justified unless it can somehow encompass the third-person perspective, or unless the third-person perspective on empirical matters is irrelevant to the character of the first-person judgment. In this fallen state, we are left with little else but a distorted conception of self-knowledge and a return to individualism.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> My knowledge that I am thinking that mercury is an element depends on an ability to think—not explicate—the thought that mercury is an element. Compare my knowledge that my words 'mercury is an element' are true if and only if mercury is an element. This knowledge depends on understanding the words 'mercury is an element' well enough to say with them, or think with them, that mercury is an element. It is this ability which distinguishes this knowledge from mere knowledge that the disquotation principle as applied to 'mercury is an element' is true (mere knowledge that the sentence "'mercury is an element' is true if and only if mercury is an element" is true). I know that my word 'mercury' applies to mercury (if to anything), not by being able to provide an explication that distinguishes mercury from every conceivable twin mercury, but by being a competent user of the word, whose meaning and reference are grounded in this environment rather than in some environment where the meaning of the word form would be different. The fact that one may not be able to explicate the difference between mercury and every possible twin mercury should not lead one to assimilate one's use of 'mercury' to knowledge of purely formal relationships (e.g., knowledge that all instances of the disquotation principle are true).

As one thinks a thought reflexively, it is an object of reference and knowledge, but simultaneously a constituent of one's point of view. The essential role that the first-person singular plays in the epistemic status of authoritative self-knowledge differentiates this knowledge not only from empirical knowledge, but also from most a priori knowledge, the justification of which does not depend on the first-person point of view in the same way.

The tendency to blur distinctions between a priori knowledge (or equally, knowledge involved in explication of one's concepts) and authoritative self-knowledge is, I think, an instance of Descartes's central mistake: exaggerating the implications of authoritative self-knowledge for impersonal knowledge of necessary truths. One clearly does not have first-person authority about whether one of one's thoughts is to be explicated or individuated in such and such a way. Nor is there any apparent reason to assume that, in general, one must be able to explicate one's thoughts correctly in order to know that one is thinking them.

Thus, I can know that I have arthritis, and know I think I have arthritis, even though I do not have a proper criterion for what arthritis is. It is a truism that to think one's thoughts, and thus to think cogito-like thoughts, one must understand what one is thinking well enough to think it. But it does not follow that such understanding carries with it an ability to explicate correctly one's thoughts or concepts via other thoughts and concepts; nor does it carry an immunity to failures of explication. So one can know what one's thoughts are even while one understands one's thoughts only partially, in the sense that one gives incomplete or mistaken explications of one's thoughts or concepts. One should not assimilate 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of basic self-knowledge to 'knowing what one's thoughts are' in the sense of being able to explicate them correctly—being able to delineate their constitutive relations to other thoughts.<sup>10</sup>

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One other comparison: I know that I am here (compare: on earth) rather than somewhere else (compare: twin earth). My knowledge amounts to more than knowing I am wherever I am. I have normal ability to perceive and think about my surroundings. I have this knowledge because I perceive my surroundings and not other conceivable surroundings, and I have it even though other places that I could not distinguish by perception or description from here are conceivable. For a variety of reasons, one should not assimilate terms like 'water' to indexicals like 'here'. Cf. "Other Bodies." But these analogies may be helpful here.

<sup>10</sup> Davidson's views about self-knowledge have some crucial points in common with mine. But he may be making this mistake when he writes that, if one concedes the possibility of partial understanding as I do, one must concede that anti-individu-

For its justification, basic self-knowledge requires only that one think one's thoughts in the self-referential, self-ascriptive manner. It neither requires nor by itself yields a general account of the mental kinds that it specifies. Conceptual explication—knowledge of how one's thought kinds relate to other thought kinds—typically requires more objectification: reasoning from empirical observation or reflection on general principles. It requires a conceptual mastery of the conditions underlying one's thoughts and a conceptual mastery of the rules one is following. These masteries are clearly beyond anything required to think thoughts in the second-order, self-ascriptive way. Explicative knowledge is neither self-verifying nor so closely tied to particular mental events or particular persons' points of view.<sup>11</sup>

Despite, or better because of, its directness and certainty, basic self-knowledge is limited in its metaphysical implications. It is nonetheless epistemically self-reliant. By itself it yields little of metaphysical interest; but its epistemic credentials do not rest on knowledge of general principles, or on investigation of the world.

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alism undermines the authority of self-knowledge. Cf. his "Knowing One's Own Mind," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, LX (1987): 448. Cf. also "First Person Authority," *Dialectica*, xxxviii, 2–3 (1984): 101–111. It is unclear to me why Davidson says this. I have discussed the distinction between the sort of understanding necessary to think and the sort of understanding necessary to explicate one's thoughts, in "Individualism and the Mental"; "Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind"; "Frege on Sense and Linguistic Meaning," forthcoming in *The Analytic Tradition*, David Bell and Neil Cooper, eds. (New York: Blackwell); and "Wherein is Language Social?" forthcoming in a volume edited by Alexander George (New York: Blackwell).

<sup>11</sup> As I indicated earlier, basic self-knowledge is at most an illuminating paradigm for understanding a significant range of phenomena that count as self-knowledge. Thus, the whole discussion has been carried out under a major simplifying assumption. A full discussion of authoritative self-knowledge must explicate our special authority, or epistemic right, even in numerous cases where our judgments are not self-verifying or immune to error. I think, however, that reflection on the way that errors can occur in such cases gives not the slightest encouragement to the view that anti-individualism (as regards either the physical or social environments) is a threat to the authority of our knowledge of the contents of our thoughts.