THE DISCRIMINATION ARGUMENT AND THE STANDARD STRATEGY

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Summary
Two major objections have been raised to Boghossian’s discrimination argument for the incompatibility of externalism and a priori self-knowledge. Proponents of the first objection claim that thoughts about “twin water” are not relevant alternatives to thoughts about water. Advocates of the second objection, the so-called standard strategy, argue with recourse to Burge’s account of self-knowledge that the ability to rule out relevant alternatives is not required for knowledge. In this essay, it is shown that the standard strategy does not provide us with a convincing response to the discrimination argument.

I.

Boghossian was the first to advance an explicit argument for the incompatibility of semantic externalism and a priori self-knowledge, the so-called discrimination argument.\(^1\) Following Warfield’s reconstruction, it can be formulated as follows (see Warfield 1992, 234f.): To know a priori that p is the case, one has to be able to rule out a priori all relevant alternatives to p. But Oscar, our protagonist, cannot rule out a priori that he thinks that twater is wet. For if he were on twin earth, thinking that twater is wet, things would seem to him exactly as they seem to him in reality. (This claim is meant to follow from an externalist interpretation of the twin earth scenario.) Moreover, the proposition that Oscar thinks that twater is wet is a relevant alternative to the fact that he thinks that water

is wet. Therefore, Oscar does not know a priori that he thinks that water is wet.\(^2\)

Two major objections have been leveled at this argument. According to the first objection, the proposition that Oscar thinks that water is wet is not a relevant alternative to the fact that he thinks that water is wet.\(^3\) The third premise of Boghossian’s argument is therefore mistaken. Proponents of the second chief objection to the discrimination argument hold that the first premise of this argument is wrong. The ability to rule out relevant alternatives is, according to them, not necessary for knowledge. To support this thesis, they draw on Burge’s account of self-knowledge (see Burge 1988, 1996). It is Burge’s view that second-order thoughts about one’s own thoughts are “self-verifying.” From this it is concluded that thoughts about one’s own thoughts are infallible and therefore amount to knowledge. Thus, our protagonist Oscar knows that he thinks that water is wet. But he cannot rule out all relevant alternatives to this thought. For he cannot rule out that he is on twin earth, thinking that water is wet. Hence, the ability to rule out relevant alternatives is not necessary for knowledge.

This second objection to the discrimination argument has been called “the standard strategy” of criticizing Boghossian’s argument because a number of philosophers think that it is an appropriate rejoinder to the argument in question.\(^4\) In this essay, I attempt to show that these philosophers are mistaken. The standard strategy does not provide us with an adequate response to the discrimination argument. It founders for two reasons. First, one cannot invoke Burge’s stance on self-knowledge in order to show that second-order thoughts are infallible or at least reliable. Second, neither infallibility nor reliability are sufficient for knowledge.

\(^2\) Here and in what follows I assume familiarity with Putnam’s and Burge’s twin earth thought experiments and the relevant-alternatives approach to knowledge developed by Dretske and Goldman. The classical sources for twin earth are Putnam (1975) and Burge (1979, 1982, 1986). For the relevant-alternatives account, see Dretske (1970) and Goldman (1976).
