Externalism and a priori knowledge of the world:
Why privileged access is not the issue

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Abstract:

I look at incompatibilist arguments aimed at showing that the conjunction of the thesis that a subject has privileged, a priori access to the contents of her own thoughts, on the one hand, and of semantic externalism, on the other, lead to a putatively absurd conclusion, namely, a priori knowledge of the external world. I focus on arguments involving a variety of externalism resulting from the singularity or object-dependence of certain terms such as the demonstrative 'that'. McKinsey argues that incompatibilist arguments employing such externalist theses are at their strongest, and conclusively show that privileged access must be rejected. While I agree on the truth of the relevant externalist theses, I show that all plausible versions of the incompatibilist *reductio* argument as applied to such theses are fundamentally flawed, for these versions of the argument must make assumptions that lead to putatively absurd knowledge of the external world independently of the thesis of privileged access.

1.

Michael McKinsey has argued that semantic externalism is incompatible with the thesis that subjects have privileged, a priori access to the contents of their own thoughts.[1] The incompatibility is supposed to result from the fact that the conjunction of the two theses leads to a putatively absurd conclusion, namely, the possibility of a priori knowledge of the external world. The original argument is of the following form, where the proposition that *p* is object-dependent, and the proposition that *E* concerns the subject's environment:

(1)   Suzy can know a priori that she is thinking that *p*.

(2)   The proposition that Suzy thinking that *p* logically implies the proposition that *E*.

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[1] McKinsey (1991, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003).

Therefore,

>   (3)   Suzy can know a priori that *E*.

McKinsey argues that for externalism to be a non-trivial thesis, externalist entailments must hold as a matter of logical or conceptual and not merely metaphysical necessity.[2] Given, for instance, that it is metaphysically impossible for anyone to exist without biological parents, being in *any* mental state will metaphysically entail the existence of an object external to me, namely, my mother.[3] But then, McKinsey argues, given the logical entailment in (2), Suzy can just deduce (3) from a premise she knows a priori.[4]

There are several closure principles that the incompatibilist might rely on to get from the privileged access and externalist premises (1) and (2) to the conclusion (3). Below I subject the candidate closure principles to scrutiny.

Though my focus will be on arguments of form (1) – (3) above, I should mention that the incompatibilist *reductio* argument is sometimes circulated in the following form, which doesn't require externalism to be logically true, though it does require it to be a priori knowable:

>   (1)   Suzy can know a priori that she is thinking that *p*.

>   (2*)   Suzy can know a priori that if she is thinking that *p*, then *E*.

Therefore,

>   (3)   Suzy can know a priori that *E*.

[2] McKinsey (1991, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003).
[3] McKinsey (2002: 201–202). See Kripke (1972: 112 - 113) for essentiality of origin.
[4] Arguments of this and closely related forms have also been employed, for instance, by Boghossian (1998) and Brown (1998).

Again, a closure principle is needed for generating the conclusion of the argument.[5]

My reason for focusing on McKinsey's version of the incompatibilist argument is that at first sight it seems more resilient to a problem that I raise and that McKinsey himself acknowledges, a problem deriving from the assumption that externalist theses can be known a priori. I will refer to both versions of the *reductio* argument as 'McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments'.

Recent debates have seen a number of responses to McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments, but the discussion so far has taken it for granted that if filled in with externalist theses involving appropriately specific environmental entailments and if sound, such arguments do provide interesting, non-trivial reasons for doubting whether the conjunction of semantic externalism and the thesis of privileged access can be retained.[6] I will argue that at least many of the incompatibilist arguments on the market, of the above and amended forms, aren't interesting *reductio ad absurdums* of the conjunction of the two theses in question. The reason for this is that such arguments must rely either on the assumption that externalist theses can be known a priori, or some other assumption that is practically as strong, and this alone, with other plausible assumptions, leads to putatively absurd knowledge of the external world. Hence, an alternative argument with a conclusion of form (3) can be constructed from the ingredients of the original *reductio* without even relying on the privileged access premise.

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[5] For this form of the argument, see, for instance, Boghossian (1998: 275) and Brown (1998; 2003; 2004).

[6] One main line of attack has been directed at the second premise either by questioning whether externalist theses can be known a priori, or whether externalist theses should be construed as involving logical or conceptual implications (see Gallois and O'Leary Hawthorne (1996), McLaughlin and Tye (1998), McLaughlin (2000: 112), Brown (2004), Brueckner (1998)). Another popular criticism has been to challenge the argument on the grounds that Suzy could not come to know that *E* by performing the deduction, since the argument exemplifies a failure of warrant transmission (see Davies (2003), Wright (2000), Wright (2003); see also McLaughlin (2003), McKinsey (2003), Brown (2003)).

I will focus on incompatibilist arguments involving externalist theses that follow from the object-dependent or singular nature of certain terms or concepts. Many philosophers agree that such terms include at least demonstratives and proper names.[7] McKinsey agrees, arguing that the problem of incompatibility is at its sharpest in connection with externalist theses involving such terms.[8] For simplicity I will focus on demonstratives. I take there to be very strong support for the claim that demonstratives function as singular terms (not quantifiers) that rigidly designate an object with respect to all possible worlds, and that if a non-referring demonstrative term occurs in a sentence, then that sentence fails to express a proposition.[9] However, these claims, and the sort of externalism they support, do not require a directly referential semantics. I leave open the possibility that demonstratives have senses, as long as these senses are 'object-dependent'[10]: as long as a demonstrative term can have a sense, thereby making a contribution to the proposition expressed by the sentence in which it figures, only if it also has a reference.[11]

Take, for instance, a case where Suzy has a demonstrative thought about Fred to the effect that he is poisonous. Let (THAT2)[12] be the following thesis:

(THAT2)   The proposition that Suzy is thinking[13] that that [Fred][14] is poisonous
                logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.[15]

Here is the McKinsey incompatibilist argument, applied to (THAT2):

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[7] For classic defences, see Kripke (1972) and Kaplan (1989).
[8] See, for instance McKinsey (1991).
[9] See Kaplan (1989).
[10] For object-dependent senses, see, e.g., McDowell (1977, 1984).
[11] Hence, I will ignore the possibility of 'gappy' or 'incomplete' propositions.
[12] Please see the Glossary for the abbreviations and acronyms used throughout the paper.
[13] Let thinking that p be entertaining the content that p, that is, having any mental state with p as its content.
[14] I use square brackets merely to indicate which object is being demonstrated.
[15] For now I am just following McKinsey in formulating the externalist thesis as involving a logical implication.

(THAT1)   Suzy can know a priori that she is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous.

(THAT2)   The proposition that Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

Therefore,

(THAT3)   Suzy can know a priori that that [Fred] exists.

I mentioned above that the second premise is more commonly circulated in the form of a material implication. I shall refer to the following, alternative externalist premise as (THAT2*):

(THAT2*)   If Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous then that [Fred] exists.

In this paper I try to undermine the viability of McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments by establishing two claims:

A) Such arguments must either assume that Suzy can have a priori knowledge of externalist theses such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*), or they must assume something that, with some very plausible assumptions, implies this.

B) Given the assumption that Suzy can know externalist theses such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) a priori, the conclusion (3) of the original *reductio* can be generated without relying on the privileged access premise (1).

In order to have an interesting *reductio* argument of the conjunction of externalism and privileged access, the incompatibilist must tell some additional story about how externalist theses can be known a priori, and in particular of how such knowledge depends on the thesis of privileged access. It is far from obvious how it would go.

In §2 I argue for A). In §3 I argue for B): any rationale for saying that Suzy can know an externalist thesis such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) a priori will also put her into a position to see, a priori, that the thesis in question itself has an externalist entailment, namely, the existence of that (Fred).

In the course of my argument I will make use of the following two closure principles. The first states that a priori knowledge is closed under a priori knowable logical implication:

Closure under a priori knowable logical implication (CAKL)

Necessarily, for any person x and any propositions that p and that q, if x can know a priori that p and x can know a priori that the proposition that p logically implies the proposition that q, then x can know a priori that q.

The second states just that a priori knowledge is closed under a priori knowable implication:

Closure under a priori knowable implication (CAK)

Necessarily, for any person x and any propositions that p and that q, if x can know a priori that p and if x can know a priori that if p then q, then x can know a priori that q.

I will bracket worries about formulating closure principles in modal terms. If such formulations prove to be unsuccessful, then friends of closure had better find some alternative way of capturing the intuitions lending support to these principles. But this is irrelevant for my present purposes, since at any point of my argument I only rely on closure principles that the proponent of McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments needs to assume.

2.

If, in addition to the privileged access premise, it it is assumed that Suzy can know the externalist thesis (THAT2) a priori, then the conclusion of the incompatibilist *reductio* follows straightforwardly by an application of *closure under a priori knowable logical implication* (CAKL). In the alternative form of the argument, if Suzy can know (THAT2*) a priori, then the conclusion follows by an application of (CAK).

But for reasons given in §3 and acknowledged by McKinsey, the incompatibilist might not want to make the unconditional assumption that Suzy can know an externalist thesis of either form (THAT2) or (THAT2*) a priori. In brief, the problem is that if a priori knowledge of externalist theses such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) is assumed, then the putatively absurd conclusion of the *reductio* appears to follow independently of privileged access. So how might the incompatibilist try to derive the conclusion of the *reductio* without making the unconditional assumption that Suzy can know (THAT2) a priori?[16]

The incompatibilist can take one of two alternative routes to the conclusion of the argument.[17] One of these doesn't at any step assume a priori knowledge of externalist thesis such as (THAT2); the other assumes such knowledge, but attempts to make it conditional on the truth of the privileged access premise.

The first route employs the following closure principle:

> **Closure of a priority under logical implication (CA)**
> Necessarily, for any person x and any propositions that p and that q, if x can know a priori that p, and the proposition that p logically implies the proposition that q, then x can know a priori that q.[18]

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[16] I won't discuss the incompatibilist argument employing as its second premise (THAT2*) or some other externalist thesis taking the form of a material implication, since there doesn't seem to be *any* way of getting the conclusion to follow from the premises without assuming a priori knowledge of (THAT2*).

[17] McKinsey (2002a: 208–210).

[18] McKinsey (2002a: 207).

(CA) asserts that that the possibility of a priori knowledge is closed under logical implication. In other words, Suzy can have a priori knowledge of any of the propositions logically implied by propositions she can know a priori. If (CA) is right, (THAT3) follows from the conjunction of (THAT1) and (THAT2). Note also that (CA) entails (CAKL).

The second route to the conclusion (THAT3) relies on (CAK) and the following principle:

Partial closure under logical implication (PLC)

Necessarily, for any person x and any propositions that p and that q, if x can know a priori that p, and the proposition that p logically implies the proposition that q, then x can know a priori that if p then q.[19]

Applied to (THAT1) – (THAT3), (PLC) states that *if* the first, privileged access premise is true – if Suzy can know a priori that she is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous – *then* she can know a priori that if she is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous then that [Fred] exists, which amounts to a priori knowledge of (THAT2*). (CAK) can then be used to derive the conclusion that Suzy can know a priori that that [Fred] exists. An argument relying on (PLC) attempts to give the privileged access premise (THAT1) an essential role by making a priori knowledge of an externalist entailment of form (THAT2*) conditional on its truth.

But independently of whether or not (PLC) is well-motivated, it is not a much weaker principle than a principle stating that for any propositions that p and that q, if the proposition that p logically implies the proposition that q, then a subject can know a priori that if p then q. And of course, from *this* principle it would follow that if

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[19] McKinsey (2002a: 209). I don't see why McKinsey formulates the consequent of (PLC) as stating that x can know a priori that if p then q, rather than that x can know a priori that the proposition that p logically implies the proposition that q. But this has no implications for my argument.

(THAT2), then a subject can know (THAT2*) a priori. With the very plausible assumption that there is at least one proposition that Suzy can know a priori – say, the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ – the conjunction of (PLC) and (CAK) gives Suzy a priori knowledge of externalist implications. The same holds for (CA). Let me spell this out.

Assume that Suzy can have a priori knowledge of at least one proposition, and let this be the proposition that r. In particular, we need the assumption that Suzy can have a priori knowledge of at least one proposition other than the proposition that she is thinking that that is poisonous (since this would entail the truth of the privileged access premise (THAT1)). Assuming that some propositions can be known a priori and that Suzy is a normal human subject, this is a very plausible assumption. Let the proposition that r be the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$.

Now, suppose that the proposition that s logically implies the proposition that u. This will mean that it is logically true that if s then u. But a logical truth is logically implied by any proposition whatsoever, including the proposition that r. Hence,

The proposition that r logically implies that (if s then u).[20]

We assumed that Suzy can know a priori that r (that $2 + 2 = 4$). By (PLC), it follows that Suzy can know a priori that if r then (if s then u), or $r \supset (s \supset u)$. Hence, (PLC) validates the following principle:

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[20] I don't want to assume any system of modal logic for the purposes of this paper. However, by making a few assumptions, we can also show that a logical implication is logically implied by any proposition and hence, that

The proposition that r logically implies that (the proposition that s logically implies the proposition that u).

First, we need to take the notion of logical implication at play in externalist theses such as (THAT2) to be informal: a proposition P logically implies a Q if and only if in every logically possible world, the material implication if P then Q holds and hence, $\square (P \supset Q)$. To get the conclusion that a logical implication is logically implied by any proposition, in addition we must assume a system of modal logic such as K4 or S4 in which the accessibility relation is transitive so that for any P, $\square P$ is equivalent to $\square \square P$. Thanks to Tim Williamson for giving me a proof. Any mistakes are due to myself.

Necessarily, for any subject *x* and any propositions that *s* and that *u*, if there is some proposition that *r* such that *x* can know a priori that *r*, and if the proposition that *s* logically implies the proposition that *u*, then *x* can know a priori that if *r* then (if *s* then *u*).

But now (CAK) validates the following argument:

Suzy can know a priori that *r*.

Suzy can know a priori that if *r* then (if *s* then *u*).

Therefore,

Suzy can know a priori that if *s* then *u*.

The same conclusion can be derived even more directly from (CA) alone.

Replacing '*r*' in the above argument by '2 + 2 = 4', '*s*' by 'Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous', and '*u*' by 'That [Fred] exists', we get the conclusion:

Suzy can know a priori that if Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous, then that [Fred] exists.

This amounts to a priori knowledge of (THAT2*).[21]

Let me sum up the lesson. The incompatibilist resorted to (PLC) to avoid assuming that externalist theses such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) can be known a priori. (PLC), it was hoped, would make the possibility of a priori knowledge of externalist entailments conditional on the privileged access premise. However, (PLC),

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[21] If we accept the idea that a logical implication is logically implied by any proposition, then by (PLC) and (CAK) we can derive the conclusion:

Suzy can know a priori that the proposition that *s* logically implies the proposition that *u*.

And consequently,

Suzy can know a priori that the proposition that she is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

This is the claim that Suzy can know (THAT2) a priori.

(CAK), an externalist thesis such as (THAT2) and the assumption that any subject the incompatibilist argument is supposed to apply to has a priori knowledge of at least one proposition entail (at least) that the subject can know an externalist thesis of form (THAT2*) a priori. The same holds for an argument relying on (CA).

In the next section I say why it is so bad for the incompatibilist to assume that Suzy can know externalist theses such as (THAT2*) a priori: I argue that any rationale for allowing Suzy to know (THAT2*) a priori will also allow her to know a priori that if (THAT2*) then that [Fred] exists. But then, I will argue, we don't really need the privileged access premise to arrive at the conclusion of the incompatibilist *reductio*.

3.

In the previous section I argued that the conclusion of McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments only follows by assuming that the externalist premise can be known a priori, or by resorting to closure principles that entail with some very plausible assumptions that at least an externalist thesis of form (THAT2*) can be known a priori. I will now argue that the conclusion of the incompatibilist argument can be generated independently of the privileged access premise given the assumption that Suzy can know either (THAT2) or (THAT2*) a priori.

Recall that externalist theses such as (THAT2) and (THAT2*) are supported by the object-dependence of the content *that [Fred] is poisonous* – if Suzy is thinking that content, then the demonstrative element *that* must refer to something. The two theses differ only in how strong the entailment between entertaining an object-dependent thought and the existence of the object the thought is about is. But (THAT2) and (THAT2*) are themselves precisely the sorts of propositions with

externalist entailments, as the proposition *that [Fred] is poisonous* is embedded in both of them.[22] Consequently, the considerations supporting (THAT2) also support the following:

(*)   (THAT2) logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

Similarly, the considerations supporting (THAT2*) can be applied to (THAT2*) itself, and so

(**)   If (THAT2*), then that [Fred] exists.

Now, the problem for the incompatibilist is that there doesn't seem to be any rationale that would allow Suzy to have a priori knowledge of (THAT2) or (THAT2*) but not of (*) or (**).

   A priori knowledge of (THAT2) or (THAT2*) would have to be based on being able to recognise, a priori, that the proposition that that [Fred] is poisonous is object-dependent – whether this would involve recognising that it is a Russellian proposition with Fred as a constituent, that it has an object-dependent sense *that*$_{FRED}$ as a constituent, or something else. But if Suzy could know a priori that the proposition that that [Fred] is poisonous is object-dependent, she should also be able to know a priori that propositions in which it is embedded are object-dependent. (THAT2) and (THAT2*) are precisely such propositions.

   If Suzy can know both (THAT2) and (*) a priori then she is in a position to know a priori that that [Fred] exists:

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[22] McKinsey (2002a: 208) points out that such propositions are singular. His reason for denying that propositions such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) can be known a priori is that such knowledge would require making an empirical assumption about the existence of an external object (in this case Fred), but one cannot know a priori that an externalist object exists.

Suzy can know (THAT2) a priori.

Suzy can know a priori that (THAT2) logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

Therefore,

Suzy can know a priori that that [Fred] exists.

The conclusion follows by an application of (CAKL). Hence, the assumption that Suzy can know (THAT2) a priori leads to precisely the sort of a priori knowledge of the environment that the incompatibilist thinks only ensues from the conjunction of privileged access and semantic externalism.

Similarly, if Suzy can know (THAT2*) a priori and she can know (**) a priori, then we can construct the following argument:

Suzy can know (THAT2*) a priori.
Suzy can know a priori that if (THAT2*), then that [Fred] exists.

Therefore,

Suzy can know a priori that that [Fred] exists.

The conclusion of this argument follows by an application of the closure principle (CAK). In the previous section I argued that any McKinsey-style incompatibilist argument – at least any argument so far proposed – must make assumptions that at least imply that Suzy can know (THAT2*) a priori. But if Suzy can know (THAT2*) a priori, she can also know (**) a priori. Then, she can know a priori that that [Fred] exists, which is the conclusion of the original McKinsey-style *reductio* argument.

Nothing so far has been said about whether it is plausible that Suzy could know (THAT2) or (THAT2*) a priori in the first place. The point is simply that the

incompatibilist seems committed to the possibility of at least knowing (THAT2*) a priori, and any rationale for allowing Suzy to have a priori knowledge of (THAT2*) would put her into a position to have a priori knowledge of the external world wholly independently of the truth or falsity of the privileged access premise. Given the closure principles he commits himself to, McKinsey is wrong in thinking that the externalist who ascribes to (THAT2) can avoid the conclusion of the incompatibilist argument by giving up privileged access.[23]

Even if incompatibilists are not warranted in assuming that arguments like (THAT1) – (THAT3) provide interesting *reductio ad absurdums* of the conjunction of privileged access and semantic externalist, it might still turn out that the putatively absurd conclusion (THAT3) only follows assuming both theses. In particular, it still remains to be seen whether arguments for the a priori knowability of externalist theses make appeal to privileged access. But this places the ball squarely within the court of the incompatibilist.

To conclude, setting aside potential problems with the closure principles employed by the incompativilist, my argument leaves open four options (they might not be mutually exclusive):

(i)   Reject externalism.

(ii)   Deny that externalist theses such as (THAT2) or (THAT2*) can be known a priori.

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[23] It is doubtful whether the conclusion I reached concerning incompatibilist arguments such as (THAT1) – (THAT3) applies across the board. For some externalist theses state that it is the possession of a concept by a particular individual that has environmental entailments, and not the object-dependence of that concept. This is true, in particular, of some externalist theses that concern natural kind concepts like *water*, such as:

(WATER2)   If Suzy is thinking that water is wet then she has had causal interactions with water.

(iii)   Argue that a priori knowledge of such externalist theses depends on privileged access in some so far unforeseen way.

(iv)   Accept that there can be some a priori knowledge of the world.

Of these options, I would opt for (iv), as I don't think a priori knowledge of the external world is at all absurd. But that is a topic for another paper.

Conclusions

I have discussed McKinsey-style incompatibilist arguments purporting to show that *either* semantic externalism resulting from the singular nature of certain terms *or* privileged access to mental states must be rejected, as their conjunction leads to the absurd conclusion that it is possible to have a priori knowledge of the external world. I argued, first, that such arguments must make assumptions that are practically as strong as the assumption that it is possible to know externalist theses a priori. Second, I argued that given this assumption, it is rather straightforward to generate the conclusion of the original incompatibilist *reductio* arguments independently of the privileged access premise.

The upshot seems to be that either McKinsey-style *reductio* arguments rely on false assumptions, or giving up privileged access won't help the semantic externalist avoid a priori knowledge of the world.[24] In the latter case, the externalist might seem to be in yet deeper trouble.

Glossary of acronyms and principles:

(THAT1)   Suzy can know a priori that she is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous.

(THAT2)   The proposition that Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

(THAT3)   Suzy can know a priori that that [Fred] exists.

(THAT2*)   If Suzy is thinking that that [Fred] is poisonous then that [Fred] exists.

(CAKL)   Necessarily, for any person *x* and any propositions that *p* and that *q*, if *x* can know a priori that *p* and *x* can know a priori that the proposition that *p* logically implies the proposition that *q*, then *x* can know a priori that *q*.

(CAK)   Necessarily, for any person *x* and any propositions that *p* and that *q*, if *x* can know a priori that *p* and if *x* can know a priori that if *p* then *q*, then *x* can know a priori that *q*.

(CA)   Necessarily, for any person *x* and any propositions that *p* and that *q*, if *x* can know a priori that *p*, and the proposition that *p* logically implies the proposition that *q*, then *x* can know a priori that *q*.

(PLC)   Necessarily, for any person *x* and any propositions that *p* and that *q*, if *x* can know a priori that *p*, and the proposition that *p* logically implies the proposition that *q*, then *x* can know a priori that if *p* then *q*.

(*)   (THAT2) logically implies the proposition that that [Fred] exists.

(**)   If (THAT2*), then that [Fred] exists.

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