

Burge on ‘basic self-knowledge’

January 27, 2004

1	The category of ‘basic self-knowledge’	1
2	The puzzle about externalism and self-knowledge	2
3	Burge’s explanation of basic self-knowledge	3
4	How far does basic self-knowledge get us?	3
5	Is basic self-knowledge really knowledge?	4

1 The category of ‘basic self-knowledge’

Burge has the following to say about Descartes’s paradigm of self-knowledge:

“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’ . . . This paradigm does further toward illuminating knowledge of our propositional attitudes than has generally been thought. . . . It is certainly plausible that these sorts of judgements 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 judgements are self-verifying in an obvious way: making these judgements itself makes them true. For mnemonic purposes, I shall call such judgements *basic self-knowledge*..” (649)

A judgement (belief, thought) that one is in a given mental state will then count as an instance of basic self-knowledge iff that the act of making that judgement makes it true that one is in the mental state (because, in so judging/believing/thinking one will put oneself into the very mental state in question).

Burge makes two claims about such instances of basic self-knowledge: (i) they count as instances of self-knowledge, and (ii) they go further toward explaining our general capacity for self-knowledge than is usually thought.

2 The puzzle about externalism and self-knowledge

Burge mentions two versions of the puzzle about the combination of privileged self-knowledge and externalism.

(1) We can conceive of our thoughts and mental states without thinking of the environmental factors which supposedly constitute them.

(2) In ‘slow switching’ cases, we can imagine an agent having different thoughts even though “the person would have no signs of the differences in his thoughts, no difference in the way things ‘feel.’” (653)

(1) is what Burge calls Descartes’s mistake: 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” (651).

(2) is the problem to which the category of basic self-knowledge is supposed to provide at least a partial answer. The puzzle may be put as follows: an agent a has mental property F , whereas agent b has the distinct property G . In one sense of ‘introspectible’, this difference between the agents’ properties makes no introspectible difference. There is a difference in the environments in which the agents live; but it seems as though the agents can know which property they have without relying on knowledge of those environments.

Compare the following assignments of properties:

(i) F =the property of believing that one has arthritis; G =the property of believing that one has tharthritis

(ii) F =the property of being to the left of a table; G =the property of not being to the left of a table

(iii) F =the property of looking at a barn; G =the property of looking at a barn facade

The difference between (i) and (ii) should be enough to see the puzzle: the difference between the properties in (ii) is not introspectible, and for this reason we would find it very surprising if someone could discern which of these properties he had solely on the basis of introspection. The thought is then that we should find this scenario puzzling in the case of (i) as well.

(i) and (iii) are importantly different, but share an important feature. Just as the difference between believing that one has arthritis and believing that one has tharthritis is indistinguishable to introspection, so the difference between looking at a barn and looking at a barn facade is indistinguishable to perception. Does this mean that we cannot know whether we are looking at a barn on the basis of perception? Does this say anything about the introspection case?

Burge’s comparison between self-knowledge and perceptual knowledge (pp. 655-656). The main thought: “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.”

This suggests that the move of requiring for knowledge that x is F that one be able to distinguish F from other properties is not an innocent one. (But to note this is not, by itself, to give an explanation of how self-knowledge works.)

3 Burge’s explanation of basic self-knowledge

Some representative claims:

“One knows one’s thought to be what it is simply by thinking it while exercising second-order, self-ascriptive powers. . . . Getting the ‘right’ one is simply a matter of thinking the thought in the relevant reflexive way.” (656)

“Justification lies not in the having of supplemental background knowledge, but in the character and function of the self-evaluating judgements.” (660)

“For its justification, basic self-knowledge requires only that one think one’s thoughts in the self-referential, self-ascriptive manner.” (663)

Compare: ‘I am here now.’ ‘I exist.’ When one utters one of these ‘self-verifying’ sentences, is the claim one makes (belief one expresses) always justified?

Burge’s two points of disanalogy between perceptual knowledge and self-knowledge, and their importance. (i) The objects of perceptual judgements are only contingently related to those judgements, whereas there is no possibility of ‘misidentifying’ the object of basic self-knowledge. (ii) The objects of perceptual judgements are typically ‘equally available’ to a number of different perceivers.

Burge thinks that his view of basic self-knowledge as self-verifying helps to explain both (i) and (ii).

4 How far does basic self-knowledge get us?

Through much of the article, Burge seems to be assuming that to give an explanation of basic self-knowledge is to give an explanation of self-knowledge *simpliciter*. But see the more cautious footnote 11.

In any case, Boghossian in ‘Content and self-knowledge’ does a nice job of pointing out the shortcomings of a theory of basic self-knowledge as a theory of self-knowledge in general.

To begin, we can follow Boghossian in distinguishing between *standing* and *occurrent* mental states.

Limitations on Burge's proposal:

1. As Boghossian points out, judgements about our standing mental states are not self-verifying in the way required for Burge's explanation of self-knowledge to work. Consider: beliefs; desires.
2. Further, not all occurrent mental states fit the paradigm; Boghossian's example is *fear*.
3. Finally, even those mental states which do fit the paradigm will only be the subject of truly self-verifying judgements if those judgements are present tense. (Recall the slow-switching experiment.)

If this is right, it looks like Burge's category of basic self-knowledge will extend only to present-tense judgements about judgements and occurrent thoughts.

5 Is basic self-knowledge really knowledge?

Boghossian uses slow switching (171-172) to argue that the cases Burge cites as central examples of basic self-knowledge are not cases of genuine knowledge. But this argument seems to prove too much.

The status of self-knowledge as 'cognitively insubstantial knowledge.' Boghossian's thought is that self-knowledge must fall into one of three categories: (i) it must be justified by inference from other beliefs, (ii) it must be justified by perception/introspection, or (iii) it must be justified without appeal to any evidence at all. He (perhaps misleadingly) terms judgements of type (iii) 'cognitively insubstantial.'

Boghossian does not say what this category amounts to, apart from identifying it negatively via categories (i) and (ii). But he seems to think that knowledge of type (iii) will have to have some very special characteristics (p. 167): in particular, if self-knowledge were like this, then it would have to be true that we have knowledge of all of our mental states (our self-knowledge should be 'complete') and that we be unable to have false beliefs about our mental states. But in fact our beliefs about our own mental states is both incomplete and fallible; hence, Boghossian concludes, self-knowledge cannot be cognitively insubstantial.

How does this characterization of 'cognitively insubstantial knowledge' follow from the trichotomy (i)-(iii)? The only quasi-argument seems to be in the last full paragraph on p. 167.

Where do standard cases of the a priori fit into (i)-(iii)?

The case of 'default-justified' beliefs.