

# No easy argument for two-dimensionalism

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In ‘Epistemic two-dimensionalism and arguments from epistemic misclassification,’ Edward Elliott, Kelvin McQueen, and Clas Weber (henceforth, ‘EM&W’) argue that a certain sort of argument against epistemic two-dimensional semantics is bound to fail. They schematize that form of argument as follows:

Premise 1: Epistemic two-dimensionalism entails that sentence *S* is a priori.  
Premise 2: *S* is not a priori.  
Conclusion: Epistemic two-dimensionalism is mistaken.

They present two different sorts of objection to this form of argument.

Their first objection is a general one: they argue that any argument of this form must fail, on the grounds that “[t]he two premises undercut each other: inasmuch as the first premise is plausible, the second becomes implausible and *vice versa*. Hence, there is no instance of an argument from epistemic misclassification where both premises are plausible” (376).

Why do they think this? EM&W rightly distinguish between the epistemic two-dimensionalist framework and an implementation of that framework, where an implementation of the framework makes claims about exactly which epistemic intension is associated with a given expression type. But, they say,

“An adequate implementation of E2D will respect our considered judgements about *apriority*. Hence, if the relevant sentence *S* is not *a priori* (i.e., if Premise 2 is plausible), an implementation of E2D which predicts that it is *a priori* is inadequate. We therefore have no reason to accept Premise 1: E2D is flexible enough that there are a range of implementations available that can account for *S*’s *aposteriority*. And conversely: if an implementation is adequate and is committed to the *apriority* of *S*, then we have reason to reject Premise 2, since an adequate implementation of E2D must be consistent with what sentences are *a priori*.” (376)

For this argument to make sense, an implementation’s being adequate must entail the implementation’s giving the right results about which sentences are and are not a priori. (Otherwise, EM&W could not infer the inadequacy of a theory from its making a false prediction about a sentence being a priori.)

Given this, it is a trivial truth that, *if* there is an adequate implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism, any argument of the above form must have a false premise. This is just an instance of the general fact that any valid argument against a true theory must have a false premise. But EM&W don’t aim to establish the conditional conclusion that if there is an adequate implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism, then arguments from epistemic misclassification fail; they aim to establish the unconditional conclusion that all arguments from epistemic misclassification fail.

But it is not at all clear how this conclusion is supposed to follow unless we assume as a premise that there is an adequate implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism. So it seems that this must be what EM&W are assuming. But this is, at best, extremely odd in the present context, given that arguments from epistemic misclassification typically aim to show that there is no implementation of two-dimensionalism which gives the right results about which sentences are and are not a priori — i.e., that there is no adequate implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism.<sup>1</sup> One can't reply to an argument against a theory by pointing out that, if the theory is true, something must be wrong with the argument.<sup>2</sup>

Their second line of objection to arguments from epistemic misclassification is more interesting. This consists less of a single objection than of an attempt to describe implementations which avoid the various arguments from epistemic misclassification which have been given in the literature. Here I'll focus on their reply to the argument of Speaks (2010).

A simplified version of that argument is based on the claims that for a given name *n* one can often come up with a pair of descriptions 'the F' and 'the G' which meet the following three conditions:

- (i) it is epistemically possible that  $\lceil$ Something is the F and something else is the G $\rceil$  is true, so that there is at least one scenario at which 'the F' and 'the G' pick out distinct individuals;
- (ii) at any such scenario, there will be no description 'the H' which is satisfied and which is such that the canonical description of the scenario epistemically necessitates  $\lceil n$  is the H $\rceil$ ; and
- (iii) claims like (among others)  $\lceil$ If *n* is F, then nothing which is not F is G $\rceil$  are not a priori.

This trio of claims is problematic for epistemic two-dimensionalism, since if (i) and (ii) are true then, by the two-dimensionalist's lights, every scenario in which  $\lceil$ Something is the F and something else is the G $\rceil$  is true will be one in which 'n' lacks a reference. But any scenario in which  $\lceil n$  is F $\rceil$  is true will be one in which 'n' has a reference. Hence  $\lceil$ If *n* is F, then nothing which is not F is G $\rceil$  will be true any every scenario, since any scenario in which its antecedent is true is one in which 'n' has a reference, and hence must not be one in which 'the F' and 'the G' pick out distinct individuals. If — as I think is often the case — this sentence is not a

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<sup>1</sup> Though often this is done in a piecemeal fashion; e.g. Speaks (2010) gives an argument against non-descriptivist implementations, taking descriptivist implementations to be ruled out by Kripke's epistemic argument. More on this below.

<sup>2</sup> EM&W emphasize the flexibility of the epistemic two-dimensionalist framework; perhaps they think that the framework is so flexible that the claim that there is some adequate implementation of it is trivial, or close to it. But this seems to me to be a mistake. Given that, as is standard, we do not permit names to figure in the canonical descriptions of scenarios, the claim that there is an adequate implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism entails that there is an assignment of epistemic intensions to expressions which is such that all and only a priori sentences involving non-semantically neutral vocabulary are a priori deducible from every epistemically possible and complete semantically neutral description. This claim may be true, but it is not trivial.

priori, then this falsifies the Core Thesis of epistemic two-dimensionalism — the claim that a sentence is a priori iff it has a necessary epistemic intension.

Are there names and descriptions which meet these three conditions? I think so, and suggested as plausible candidates for the name ‘Mick Jagger’ the descriptions

the lead singer on *Sympathy for the Devil* & member of the greatest band of the 1960's & once enrolled in the London School of Economics & the star of *Freejack* & . . .

member of the greatest band of the 1960's & one of the Glimmer Twins & born in Kent in 1943 & helped to organize the infamous concert at Altamont & . . .

The key is just that there is a rough parity between the two as regards the number of properties in the two conjunctions and the centrality of those properties to my conception of Mick Jagger. Either could be extended indefinitely without affecting the argument so long as that parity is preserved, and so long as it is still epistemically possible that one thing have the first collection of properties, and something else the second.

It is fairly clear that these descriptions satisfy condition (i) above. Do they satisfy (ii)? According to epistemic two-dimensionalism, for a name  $n$  to refer to something in a scenario  $e$  is for it to be the case that, for some non-empty description ‘the F’, the conditional  $\lrcorner e \rightarrow (n = \text{the F}) \lrcorner$  is a priori.<sup>3</sup> But consider a scenario in which the above descriptions pick out different objects. Can I know a priori, on the basis of what is the case in that scenario, who Mick Jagger is? I can’t, since the fact that the properties I associate with Mick are instantiated by distinct individuals pulls me in two directions; this should leave me unsure which, if either, is Mick Jagger, and hence will leave me unable to know a priori on the basis of the description of the scenario whether Mick satisfies either of the above descriptions. And clause (iii) also seems to be satisfied, since I simply can’t deduce a priori from the claim that Mick satisfies the first of the above descriptions whether or not anything other than Mick satisfies the second.

EM&W suggest two main ways in which an implementation of epistemic two-dimensionalism might avoid this argument. The first is that the epistemic intension of a name might be given by a description. In that case, the description might be such that it simply can’t be ‘split’ into two descriptions which exhibit the sort of parity exemplified by the collections of properties above.<sup>4</sup> They suggest, in particular, that it might be the case that the reference of a name at a scenario is fixed by a meta-linguistic condition like ‘the referent of my community’s usage of  $n$ .’ If a single descriptive condition like this is doing all the reference fixing work, then condition (ii) above won’t be satisfied, and the above form of argument won’t get off the ground.

In Speaks (2010) I was interested in arguing against non-descriptivist implementations of two-dimensionalism, mainly because I took descriptivist implementations to be substantially

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<sup>3</sup> One might also say that for a name to refer to something in a scenario is for the scenario description to epistemically necessitate  $\lrcorner n$  is the F  $\lrcorner$ . See Speaks (2010) for a discussion of the equivalence of this formulation with the one given in the main text above.

<sup>4</sup> They describe two ways in which this might happen; see their discussion of ‘best element’ and ‘simple property’ implementations.

undermined by Kripke's epistemic argument. While I agree with EM&W that the forms of descriptivism they discuss block the form of argument discussed above, I'm less convinced that their response to the epistemic argument is satisfactory.

Their main line of response is that, whatever may be true of 'famous deeds' descriptivism, it is far from obvious that sentences like

Mick Jagger is the referent of my community's usage of 'Mick Jagger.'

are a posteriori; hence it is far from obvious that the epistemic argument delivers a *reductio* of this sort of meta-linguistic descriptivism.

This is a familiar move; but not, I think, an altogether comfortable one for the epistemic two-dimensionalist. Epistemic (as opposed to contextual) two-dimensionalism is after all motivated largely by the wish to make sentences like

Word tokens exist.

come out, as they should, a posteriori — we can't know a priori of the existence of linguistic tokens any more than we can know a priori of the existence of dogs.<sup>5</sup>

But the proponent of the above response to the epistemic argument is committed to the a prioricity of

If Mick Jagger exists, then 'Mick Jagger' exists.

Presumably it is also a priori that

If 'Mick Jagger' exists, then word tokens exist.

By transitivity, it is then a priori that

if Mick Jagger exists, then word tokens exist.

This is at best an unattractive conclusion — especially when paired with the claim that the consequent of this condition is a posteriori. If we can't know a priori that language exists, how can it be an a priori consequence of knowing that Mick Jagger exists? (Obviously nothing here turns on the fact that Mick Jagger is a user of language; we could have derived a parallel conclusion using 'Mt. Everest.')

So let's turn to their response to my use of the above form of argument against non-descriptivist implementations of epistemic two-dimensionalism. Their main objection is that, once descriptivism is off the table, we can never be sure that we have come up with descriptions which satisfy condition (ii) above, according to which any scenario in which the descriptions pick out different things will be one in which the name lacks a reference. This is because

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<sup>5</sup> See Chalmers (2006) for a discussion of this problem.

“For some scenarios ... we may have to decide if something is F or G (or both) to settle the name’s reference. But for other scenarios, perhaps only F is considered, or G, or even some completely different property P (and so on). There may be no finite set of properties that we use to determine reference—each individual scenario might in principle be coupled with its own unique method for reference-determination. ... All we need ... is for there to be some scenario in which [distinct things are F and G], and in which Mick Jagger is identified as the P instead. The fact that in this scenario something is the F and something else is the G then does not entail Mick Jagger’s non-existence, as he is the P there. Given non-descriptivism, we see no reason why there should not be such a scenario.”

I don’t think that this response is convincing. To see why, let’s ask whether P is a property that I attribute to Mick Jagger — a property which forms part of my conception of Jagger — or not.

Suppose first that it is part of my conception of Jagger, but simply happens not to appear on either of the lists of the F-properties or the list of the G-properties. Then we can simply add it to one of the lists, and add a property of roughly equal centrality to my conception of Jagger to the other list. Perhaps for some names this will be impossible; perhaps one condition really is so central to my conception of an object that it trumps all others. But this is plainly not true for every name we use; and all we need to run the argument is one such name.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose that we take the other horn of the dilemma, and say that P is *not* part of my conception of Mick Jagger. Suppose, for instance, that it is the property of being the greatest basketball player in the world. Then it is baffling why it should have any role at all in fixing the reference of ‘Mick Jagger’ at *any* scenario.

Recall that the way in which the reference of names is fixed: we’re supposed to survey the canonical description of some scenario, and then ask, for any description, whether we can deduce a priori from that scenario description that the name refers to the thing which satisfies that description. Let’s call this *the reference-fixing description for that scenario*.<sup>7</sup> On non-descriptivist implementations, the reference-fixing description may well vary from scenario to scenario; this is just because it may well vary from scenario to scenario what things fall under which descriptions. In one scenario I might identify Mick in part because he is a member of *The Rolling Stones* in that scenario; relative to that scenario, ‘is a member of the *Rolling Stones*’ might be part of the reference-fixing description. In other scenarios, I might manage to identify Mick despite his not being in that band; in those scenarios, ‘is a member of the *Rolling Stones*’ will not be part of the reference-fixing description.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth emphasizing at this point that we don’t need to pack *everything* about my conception of Mick Jagger into our two lists of properties; maybe it would even be impossible to do so. All we need is to put enough into our two lists to ensure that, given the knowledge that distinct things instantiated the relevant collections of properties, we would always be unsure which was Mick. And that seems to me to be clearly possible.

<sup>7</sup> Talk of *the* reference-fixing description for a name relative to a scenario is a simplification — where there is one such description, there will be several. Also, strictly, a description will not be reference-fixing for a name and scenario simpliciter, but rather for a name and scenario relative to a speaker and a time. I ignore this sort of thing for simplicity above.

What does *not* vary from scenario to scenario, even on non-descriptivist implementations, is the conception of Mick Jagger that I bring to bear in deciding what the reference-fixing description for a given scenario is. It's not as though, in one scenario, I identify Mick by looking for properties like those in the lists above, but in other scenarios, I identify Mick Jagger only by looking at which individual in that world is the greatest basketball player. It seems to me that EM&W conflate the correct claim that on non-descriptivist implementations the reference-fixing descriptions will vary from scenario to scenario with the incorrect claim that the speaker's conception of the referent of the name — which is what the speaker uses to figure out which the reference-fixing description for a particular scenario is — also varies from scenario to scenario.<sup>8</sup>

Even if we reject EM&W's argument for the conclusion that 'Mick Jagger' might have a reference even in scenarios where distinct things are F and G, one might still wonder: how can we be sure, on a non-descriptivist implementation, that the name will lack a reference in all such scenarios?

All I can do is invite you to carry out this thought experiment: imagine compiling two lists of fairly substantial length — say, 1,000 each — which contain properties which you attribute to Mick Jagger, which jointly contain all of the most central properties, which exhibit the kind of parity described above, and which are such that it is epistemically possible that something has one of the collections of properties, and something else has the other. Suppose now that you learned that distinct things exhibited the two collections of properties. Consider the following three questions:

- (a) Would you be able to know a priori which was Mick Jagger?
- (b) If you knew a complete canonical description of the world, would you be able to know a priori which was Mick Jagger?
- (c) If you knew a complete canonical description of the world, and were an ideal reasoner, would you be able to know a priori which was Mick Jagger?

The answer to (a) is clearly 'No.' It also seems to me that the answer to (b) is clearly 'No' — for, whatever further information about the world I am given, it simply will not help me decide whether the F, the G, or something else is Mick Jagger — for whatever further information I am given, it would be relatively trivial relative to my conception of Jagger. (I'm not sure what the 2001st most important part of my conception of Mick Jagger is — but it wouldn't be anything which would put me in a position to conclusively know which way to break a tie of the sort we are discussing.) Question (c) is the key question, and, while I also think that the answer to question (c) is 'No', I concede that I don't have a completely firm grip on what an ideal reasoner would be able to discern. But the burden here is surely on the side of the proponent of a 'Yes' answer to (c) to say *something* to give us an idea of what sort of a priori reasoning might, in the situation envisaged, enable an ideal subject to know a priori which of the two individuals (or someone else) is Mick. If an ideal reasoner would just be better at the sort of reasoning that I can do, then it seems very clear that no amount of

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<sup>8</sup> One might try to develop a two-dimensionalist theory which did not let the reference-fixing descriptions for a name and scenario for a given speaker depend on that speaker's conception of the reference of the name. But it's not easy to see how such a theory would work, because it is not easy to see what would constrain the possible choices of reference-fixing descriptions for scenarios. And we need some way of constraining them, on pain of giving every name the same epistemic intension.

further a priori reasoning will enable that reasoner to conclusively determine which, if either, of the relevant individuals is Mick Jagger.

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The basic idea behind the argument against (non-descriptivist implementations of) epistemic two-dimensionalism is very simple. Sometimes, for a name  $n$ , there are lists of properties F, G which are such that, no matter what else we find out about the world, learning that distinct things instantiate the F and G properties would lead us to be unsure ‘which thing is  $n$ .’ In such cases, given the definition of reference for names provided by epistemic two-dimensionalism,  $n$  will lack a reference; and this will entail the a priority of sentences like ‘If the  $n$  is F, then nothing else is the G.’<sup>9</sup> But in many cases it seems pretty clear to me that these sentences will not be a priori. EM&W do not show that this basic argument is unsound; still less do they show that any possible argument from epistemic misclassification must fail.<sup>10</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>9</sup> One might, of course, respond to this by revising the definition of reference for names given by epistemic two-dimensionalism — perhaps by utilizing some version of supervaluationist semantics. This seems to me the most promising way of replying to the sort of objection to epistemic two-dimensionalism I defend.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks for comments on previous versions of this paper to Edward Elliott, Kelvin McQueen, and Laura Schroeter.