

Contrastivism and Individualism: A Reply to Sawyer

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I.

In “Contrastive Self-Knowledge” (2014), Sarah Sawyer argues that self-knowledge is properly understood to be contrastive in nature. She then argues that this contrastive feature of self-knowledge yields evidence against individualism about concepts. The focus of this first, exegetical portion of our response to Sawyer’s article will be to position Sawyer’s article within the larger literature on epistemological contrastivism. In the second portion below, our focus will become more critical as we evaluate Sawyer’s argument for anti-individualism.

Epistemological contrastivism is an outgrowth of investigations into the semantics of contrastive statements (see in particular Dretske 1972). In these investigations, it is noted that a single statement often has multiple distinct meanings within ordinary language, and that these meanings seem to result from a contrast implied by the statement. For instance, I might be asked two questions — to whom did I sell my typewriter and what did I sell to Clyde — and answer with the statement, ‘I sold my typewriter to Clyde’. In the first case, what I mean is that I sold my typewriter to Clyde, *rather than selling it to someone else*. Similarly, in the second case I mean that I sold my typewriter to Clyde, *rather than selling something else to Clyde*.

Epistemological contrastivism picks up on this semantic point, and argues that key epistemological concepts should be conceived according to a contrastive model. Most commonly, a contrastivist argues that justification-related concepts such as explanation, evidence, and reasons are contrastive in nature. This is because pragmatically an investigation begins, either explicitly or implicitly, with a set of alternatives, and the explanations, evidence, *and reasons* are meant to justify the claim that some alternative, rather than the others, is correct. This in turn often leads the contrastivist to conclude that knowledge itself is contrastive. Since the justification for any knowledge will be relative to a contrast class, it is hard to see how the knowledge itself is not also relative to the contrast class (see Schaffer 2005 and Dretske 1972).

Such a knowledge-contrastivism is particularly noteworthy for how it handles the closure paradox. A recurring epistemological problem is that the following three propositions appear to be independently true, and yet are jointly inconsistent:

- (1) I know that I have two hands.
- (2) I do not know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat.
- (3) If I do not know that I am not a brain-in-a-vat, then I do not know that I have two hands.

The contrastivist claims that she has the best response to this paradox because she can resolve this inconsistency while saving the appearances of all three propositions being

true. This is because (1) is properly construed as meaning that I know that I have two hands rather than 1 hand or three hands or prosthetics, whereas the consequent of (3) denies that I know that I have two hands rather than merely apparent vat-hands. Because the contrast classes in (1) and the consequent of (3) are different, the result of a *modus ponens* using (2) and (3) is no longer inconsistent with (1) (for more on the closure paradox, see Schaffer 2005, 259-268).

Sawyer is sympathetic to this form of knowledge-contrastivism, and accepts it as an account of knowledge of the external world. However, Sawyer argues that the contrastive nature of justification concepts does not guarantee that self-knowledge is contrastive because “self-knowledge and second-order beliefs are often thought precisely *not* to be evidence-based, explanation-based, or discriminative in form” (Sawyer 2014, 7). Sawyer’s paper attempts to establish that, despite this, self-knowledge is rightly conceived of as contrastive.

To do so, Sawyer argues that beliefs, as well as many other propositional attitudes, are contrastive in nature (for an opposing view, see Dretske 1972, 435). According to Sawyer, having beliefs about the external world and having beliefs about one’s own mental states both entail the ability to answer a certain question in a certain manner. For this reason, beliefs are inherently question-relative. Furthermore, since the same belief can be the answer to multiple questions, it follows that each belief has an implicit contrast class that identifies which question(s) the belief is relevant to. From here, Sawyer’s final claim is that both external-world knowledge and self-knowledge are contrastive, not necessarily because the justification supporting them is contrastive, but because the belief constituting them is.

Although this differentiates Sawyer’s position from the standard contrastivist position, there does not appear to be anything that would undermine the contrastivist solution to the closure paradox, which seems to be contrastivism’s greatest virtue. However, Sawyer’s position has the further advantage of providing a unified account of propositional knowledge, whereas other contrastivists often seem unconcerned with non-external-world knowledge (see Schaffer 2005 and Dretske 1972).

As we understand her, Sawyer’s main argument for the contrastive nature of self-knowledge appears to be largely cogent. However, we are unsure about the status of the anti-individualist consequences Sawyer draws from her main argument.

II.

Sawyer’s case against conceptual individualism proceeds from what she has shown with contrastivism about self-knowledge. Her argument runs, as we see it, from identifying individualism to then producing a purported counter-example to individualism. The first step is to define individualism:

[T]he concept a subject possesses is determined by how that individual subject uses the concept (Sawyer 2014, 11).

So the concept (C) the individualist holds a subject (S) as possessing is determined by S's own inferences involving C, reasons surrounding C, and relevant applications of C. The next stage in Sawyer's argument is to pose a case of concept elision, exemplified by "the child who possesses the concept wanting but cannot distinguish want from expectation." Such a case would be one wherein it is "possible to think with a concept one grasps incompletely" (Sawyer 2014, 11).

Sawyer does not provide any more with the example, so we will pose what we think she might have in mind. If we were to say that Little Billy can't distinguish wanting from expecting, we'd need at least two performances from Billy to merit this assessment.

Performance #1: Little Billy says, "I want a lollypop for dessert," and when offered the choice between a lolly and cake, he takes the lolly, and says, "I didn't know you had lollies!"

Performance #2: Little Billy says, "I want a lollypop for dessert," but then he says, "I don't really like lollies."

In Performance #1, we'd say he wants, but didn't expect the lolly; in #2, we'd say he expects but doesn't really want it. The individualist's view would be that the concept we, as third persons, should attribute to Billy would best be captured by *wants or expects*.

Sawyer's view is that such a disjunctive concept would make contrastive statements about Billy impossible, were individualism true.

[I]f the propositional attitude concepts are individuated by how the subject employs them, then this leaves no room for a contrast in the attitude-place of self-knowledge at all (Sawyer 2014, 11).

Such a contrast would, for Billy, make no sense, because the contrastives require that he be able to distinguish wanting from expecting. He can't do that, so it makes a hash of the contrastive statements. Sawyer concludes:

If we are to make sense of a contrast in the attitude place of the proposition that provide the contents of self-knowledge, then we must be anti-individualists about propositional attitude concepts (Sawyer 2014, 11).

This is because, as Sawyer notes earlier, state-conditions are contrastive, and so for any subject (S) to have self-knowledge of S's propositional attitudes, S must be able to distinguish those attitudes from others.

But notice that the contrastive statements we have proposed are *third-personal*. We asked whether Billy *wanted* or *expected* lollypops. One might instead pose them *second-personally*, and ask Billy in the right tone:

Do you *want* a lolly, or do you *expect* one?

Doing so might display to Billy that he may have elided two distinct attitudes. Given this, it seems the individualist is still in good position to explain why Billy would be initially befuddled by the question, since he's not in a position to distinguish the two. So the individualist can explain why one could not communicate what the contrasts are with the contrastive statements.

But still, what of the *third personal* cases? For sure, Billy's own states, assuming Sawyer is right about them being contrastive, will not bear the contrasts between *expects* and *wants*. However, the individualist can accept this and claim that Billy does not distinguish between these concepts in his own case of self-knowledge. We, in attributing the concept to him, do so with a disjunction, so when Billy says he knows he *wants* a lolly, we'd be in a better position to say he knows he *wants or expects* a lolly. That Little Billy can't have contrastive knowledge comprised of concepts he does not possess is not a surprise to the individualist. Our point is that for Sawyer's counter-example to individualism to be a full counter-example, the case must yield something inconsistent with individualism.

We do not hold that our reply here is a vindication of individualism. Rather, our reply is that Sawyer's case for anti-individualism can use some clarification: first, because when framed first- and third-personally, the case of Billy need not be a counter-example to individualism; and second, because when framed second-personally, the case is exactly the kind of phenomenon an individualist would predict.

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