

Can two-dimensionalists acquire concepts?

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Two-dimensionalists claim that our concepts have two-dimensional intensions, i.e. that they determine not only the referents, extensions and truth-conditions they actually have, but also the referents, extensions and truth-conditions they would have if uttered in other (nearby?) possible worlds. "Water", e.g., thus determines two intensions, the secondary intension which includes all actual and possible H₂O, and a primary intension which includes all sorts of stuff at all sorts of worlds that we would have called "water" if we lived there. While the secondary intension is supposed to be what our words mean given that the world has turned out to be that way or other, the primary intension is supposed to capture the narrow, world-independent aspect of the meanings of our words. "Water is H₂O", it is said, is necessary because the secondary intensions of "water" and "H₂O" coincide, while it is a posteriori because their primary intensions do not. I want to argue that this picture makes a distinction without difference, in that it ascribes speakers dispositions for which no truthmakers, neither here nor in other worlds, are to be found.

Take Oscar, a philosophically interested chemist, who – having read *Naming and Necessity* – uses "water" and "H₂O" interchangeably, i.e. such that, for him, "water is H₂O" is a priori. He differs from us, if the two-dimensionalist picture is correct, in his counterfactual language use. How can this difference be brought out?

Let him consider Twin Earth, where the watery stuff (the stuff in the lakes etc.) is not H₂O but XYZ and ask him whether his Twin-Earthian counterpart Twoscar, using "water" in the same way than he does, would call the Twin-Earthian watery stuff "water". His answer will be "No". Given that we know that water is H₂O and that we believe that this is necessarily so, this will be our answer too. Our counterparts will only call XYZ "water" if they do not know what water is. But then, Oscar, a thorough Kripkean, will object, they do not use the word in the same way than we do.

So let us try a different route. Oscar thinks, and we deny, that "water is watery stuff" is a posteriori. Being told that water is watery stuff, he gets information while we do not; he is astonished while we are not. As we both agree that it is contingent that water is watery stuff, we both take Twin Earth to be possible, a world we both describe as a place where the local watery stuff is not H₂O. We only disagree in that he, but not we, would describe it further as a world where water is not watery stuff. We all learnt from Kripke, however, that we would thereby be misdescribing Twin Earth.

What then is "It is a priori that water is watery stuff" supposed to mean? It seems to me that it can mean two things, according to two readings of "watery stuff" in the claim "water is watery stuff". In neither alternative, however, we get a substantial point of disagreement with poor Oscar.

The first reading takes "watery stuff" to be the description whereby "water" might have been actually introduced in our language. We then give "water is watery stuff" the following form:

(1) D_{that} (watery stuff) is watery stuff.

where " D_{that} " is *not* a rigidifying operator, but a directly referential singular term. This is the role Kaplan originally intended for " D_{that} " (Kaplan 1989: 579). The content of the accompanying description "the Φ " in " D_{that} (the Φ)" is not part of the content of the singular term: the description merely serves as a "demonstrative surrogate" (1989: 581), completing the character and not the content of the term. It is, so to say, "off the record", and not part of the semantics, but of the metasemantics of the referring term " D_{that} ".

The problem with this first reading is that it does not ensure that (1) is actually true. It is well known that we may fix the reference using descriptions which do not apply to the thing reference to which is fixed. It will not help, however, to *presuppose* that water is what is the actual watery stuff, for Oscar will agree on this, while still claiming that (1) is only a posteriori true.

On the second construal of the relation between "water" and "watery stuff", "water is watery stuff" comes down to:

(2) \ddagger (watery stuff) is watery stuff.

where \ddagger is a rigidifying operator (Stalnaker's 'upside-down dagger' (1978: 83n.)) that takes a description to form a singular term denoting in all possible worlds whatever uniquely satisfies the description in the actual world, that is projecting the diagonal of a term onto the vertical and replicating at the other columns. " \ddagger (the Φ)" is, in Kaplan's terms, "a rigid description which induces a complex 'representation' of the referent into the content" (1989: 580) and thus corresponds to the semantic construal of "watery stuff".

The problem with this second reading is that it makes some assumptions about the semantics of "watery stuff" Oscar is likely not to share. (2) claims that "watery stuff" is world-independent, i.e. that its secondary intension does not depend on the world in which it is uttered. Twoscar, if he uses language in the same way than Oscar, will call "watery stuff" in other worlds whatever has the superficial properties of XYZ in his world. That his XYZ qualifies as watery stuff *by our standards*, does not mean that any standard based on *its* superficial properties will be the same as ours. If we allow for the possibility that Twoscar uses "watery stuff" differently than we do, however, the matrices of "watery stuff" and its projection " \ddagger (watery stuff)" will no longer be the same. Whether or not they pick out the same stuff, then, will depend on the world in which they are uttered.

The moral seems to be that on none of the two construals we get any substantive disagreement with Oscar. The distinction between us, then, is a distinction without a difference. We are now in a position to see what is wrong with the following argument:

"Given that we have the ability to know what our concepts refer to when we know how the actual world turns out, then we have the ability to know what our concepts would refer to *if* the actual world turned out in various ways." (Chalmers 1996: 59-60)

It may be that, given that we know how the actual world turns out (e.g. that water is H₂O), we know what our words refer to (e.g. "water" to H₂O). It does not follow from this, however, that we have the *further* knowledge that, for any possible way the actual world turns out, our words would refer to such or such things. Linguistic knowledge is knowledge about one particular this-worldly language, not knowledge about a whole range of different languages.