



KLE

Williamson's Infallibilistic Externalism

Angel Chen

McGill University, Class of 2009

Timothy Williamson proposes a new direction for the project of understanding the concept of knowledge. He claims that knowledge is unanalyzable – that it cannot be broken down into more basic concepts. This seems like a rather promising approach given the apparent hopelessness of the Gettier projects, and given that there are unanalyzable fundamental (primitive) concepts – knowledge might just turn out to be one of them. However, this cannot be the end of the story; without an analysis, we are still in need of some "positive understanding" of "knowledge".

Williamson argues that the necessary and sufficient condition to know P just is to have the mental state of knowing P. That is to say, for Williamson, knowledge is *merely* a mental state; it is the most general factive (truth-entailing) and stative mental state. This is a radical departure from the traditional views that take knowledge to be some metaphysical hybrid of a mental state (i.e. believing) and non-mental condition(s) on the external world (for example, truth and justification) significantly in that Williamson's notion of knowledge is independent of and conceptually prior to belief.

Williamson further argues that knowledge alone constitutes evidence. Therefore, one's total evidence is simply one's total knowledge. Knowledge, as evidence, is what justifies belief (i.e. belief in a hypothesis), not the thing that gets justified. In other words, if you have the propositional attitude of knowing towards P, then if you were to have the propositional attitude of believing towards P, your belief in P would be *justified*.

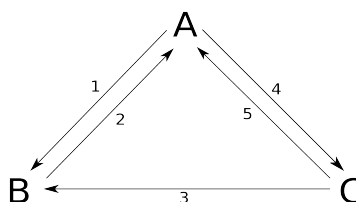
Also important to Williamson's overall project is the rejection of the KK principle, which roughly says that if S knows that P, then S knows (or is in a position to know) that S knows that P. Williamson rejects KK in

virtue of the anti-luminosity argument, which rejects the view that for any mental state, S always knows the mental state S is in.

Crudely, I have sketched out Williamson's epistemological program as one that takes knowledge to be a mental state, which makes up the evidential standard for belief. In this paper, I wish to point out Williamson's failure to engage the internalists and defend him for having successfully captured coherently an external and infallibilistic concept of knowledge that has a pronounced place in our pre-theorized conceptual map. Further, I will make some remarks about whether the concept captured by Williamson is the crux of epistemology. The question of whether or not Williamson's externalism is more plausible than internalism and the question of whether or not Williamson's externalism is the most appealing version of externalism are will not be addressed at length.

I. INTERLOCKING THESES

The meat of Williamson's epistemological program can be viewed as having three consistent, interlocking parts: (A) the thesis that knowing is a mental state, (B) the thesis that our total evidence is our total knowledge ($E = K$), (C) the rejection of the KK principle. Each thesis is independently argued for. Here, I aim to point to several connections between the three theses. Then, in later sections, I will elaborate on some of the connections and discuss some implications of the interlock.



1. A is indispensable in arguing for B: The view that knowledge is evidence would not be plausible under any version of the traditional analysis of knowledge. This is because the thing that justifies belief would be a justified true belief of some kind; then, there would be an infinite regress. Moreover, if justification is a condition for knowledge, all knowledge would be self-justifying under $E = K$.
2. B is important for establishing A: The thesis that knowledge is a mental state would be (even more) unfavorable if Williamson did not relate it to other concepts in epistemology such as justification and evidence. In defending thesis B, Williamson demonstrates that his notion of knowledge improves our understanding of a number of concepts in epistemology and resolves several epistemological puzzles traditional epistemologists encounter.
3. C lends support to B: Given A, B and C seem incompatible at first glance because it follows from them that our total evidence is not luminous (transparent to the mind/perfectly accessible). "[How] can one conform one's beliefs to one's evidence unless one is in a position to know what it is?" However, the rejection of the KK principle, in virtue of the anti-luminosity argument, actually lends support to B because the anti-luminosity argument casts doubts on the possibility that all mental states are always luminous. If we are convinced that at least some mental states are not always luminous (that is, if we buy the anti-luminosity argument), then since there is the chance of ending up with non-luminous evidence whichever mental state we take evidence to be, accepting the concept of knowledge and the concept of evidence as co-extensive and, therefore, both non-luminous does not seem so implausible after all.

Further, Williamson argues that we should not expect to be in a position to access to our total evidence for we should not be rationally required to acquire evidence of whether something is part of our present total evidence. This line of argument has far-reaching implication on the nature of rationality – we might be rationally required to do something even though we are not in a position to know what rationality demands.

4. A cannot be true unless C is correct: It is observed that one is not always in a position to know if one knows something. After all, we do not want to say that one is always in a position to tell whether one knows or merely believes. Therefore, if one is always in a position to know if one is in a mental state (if C is not sound), knowledge cannot be a mental state (A is false).
5. C explains A: C is an important premise of externalism. Despite that Williamson's view might be seem as lying outside of the debate between the externalists and the internalists since his notion of knowledge requires neither an external grounding nor an internal justification, he argues that his view is *the* correct account of externalism. The idea is that since knowledge is *merely* a mental state; it has neither external factors nor internal factors. Also, since it follows from the rejection of the KK principle that one is never in a position to know that one is in the mental state of knowing that P, no story about how one knows, either about some casual relations in the external world, or in the mind, needs to be told. Therefore, the rejection of KK helps to explain the functioning of the mental state of knowing that P and, consequently, suggests an externalism fully fleshed out (as Williamson would like to think).

II. INTERNALISM DEFEATED?

The only part of Williamson's epistemological program that directly engages the internalists in Williamson's project is thesis C, the rejection of the KK principle even though Williamson takes internalists to be the enemy in defense of both theses A and B and attempts to shift the burden of proof onto the internalists in places. He acknowledges that the only direct argument against the internalists is the rejection of KK. However, in this section, I will argue that the rejection of KK does not pose a serious threat to the internalists given its connections with the other theses.

The rejection of KK relies on the anti-luminosity argument, which rejects the idea that all mental states are luminous. The argument relies on the reliability condition assumption that we cannot always tell when there is a minor change in the actual world – we have a limited power of discrimination to changes in the world; our mind is not sufficiently sensitive to the world. I think the motivation for the reliability condition assumption is fairly intuitive and pervasive. For example, we can know (by seeing) that a distant tree is taller than 1 meter but shorter than 1729 meters. However, we cannot know (by seeing) if it is exactly 1.729 meters tall. Another example is about the individuation of mental state: “the difference between remembering an incident in one's early childhood and imagining it is a difference in mental state”, but it is one about which it is difficult to distinguish.

If knowledge is not *merely* a mental state, the move from the rejection of the luminosity principle to the rejection of the KK principle becomes less apparent. The question at hand is whether anti-luminosity is a condition of knowledge insofar as the concept of knowledge used takes a mental state as one of its components. That is, we should ask if the anti-luminosity argument could be extended to the rejection of KK if knowledge is a metaphysical hybrid of a mental state and other factors. It may be argued that knowledge is a true belief obtained through some process Y such that the belief (in itself non-luminous) becomes luminous in virtue of Y.

However, this might not be a promising route for the internalists since Y is likely to be wholly internal – Y may also be open to the anti-luminosity argument.

More generally, internalists think that the answer to interesting questions about knowledge essentially has to do with what goes on in our mind. Therefore, if KK is rejected, it seems like internalism cannot have any success. However, an internalist can bite the bullet and maintain that what goes on in our mind is crucial to the question of how we come to know and what it is that we know; so what if what goes on in our mind is not *completely* open to introspection? In other words, it might be enough for the internalists that we *sometimes* are in the position to know whether we know that P.

Given the discussion above, we might want to suspend our judgment regarding the centrality of the luminosity principle in the debate between externalism and internalism. I think the externalism versus internalism debate largely hinges on the externalists' presumption that whether S knows that P *tracks* S's sensitivity to the actual world – that is, whether S knows that P depends on just the facticity of the world and a correct account of why S has a belief. If Williamson thinks that rejecting internalism is important for his epistemological program, the claim to be rejected is the claim that whether S knows that P requires internal justification. Then, none of the three theses discussed in the last section engages the internalists directly – Williamson's epistemological program, as it stands, does not pose a threat to the internalists.

In fact, Williamson's effort of rejecting the KK principle should be merited first and foremost for bringing to light that the degree of sensitivity we have to the actual world may not be as high as some of the traditional externalists would like to think. That is, given that we are not perfectly sensitive to changes in the actual world, the view that only an external, reliable process allows us to count our belief towards knowledge loses its plausibility – if S's knowledge depends on how well his total mental states *tracks* the actual world, the rejection of KK would greatly lower the possibility of knowing. Then,

Williamson's version of externalism where knowledge is prior to belief suddenly seems more attractive.

Williamson fails to address the internalists conclusively because the one thesis in the interlock that is supposed to engage the internalists fails to carry the weight. Instead, the three theses together are persuasive against a traditional externalist. In the next section, I will argue that Williamson's real enemy is the fallibilists.

III. "QUAINT RELIC" OF INFALLIBILISM

The debate between fallibilism and infallibilism might seem irrelevant to Williamson's epistemological program for the debate is about whether a belief can be justified, and at the same time fails to amount to knowledge for being false. More generally, the debate is about the nature of reliability conditions, about whether the same condition will always ensure a belief being counted as knowledge. No story about how knowledge is secured needs to be told in Williamson's framework since, the concept of justification or warrantedness appears nowhere in Williamson's understanding of the concept of knowledge. On the face of it, since only knowledge, as evidence, justifies belief, all justified belief is true, and yet no belief amounts to knowledge. However, I think Williamson's account conforms to an infallibilistic notion of knowledge in the sense that it implies that the stake of knowing is very high, but S can claim the knowledge of P if S indeed knows that P no matter how that knowledge is gained. Moreover, there is no chance that S's propositional attitude of believing towards P could have been mistaken if S has a corresponding propositional attitude of knowing towards P.

The motivation behind fallibilism lies largely in scientific inquiry – particularly, in the idea that there is always room for error and revision in the quest for knowledge. When we claim to have "reached" knowledge, the burden is on us to back up our discovery with evidence and explanation; only after showing how the discovery deserves the claim to knowledge, can one's hypothesis gain the honorary

status of knowledge. What is built in to this picture is that in light of a new set of observation, we might lose our claim to knowledge. Williamson tries to show that knowledge is merely the most general factive mental state, that it is co-extensive with evidence, and that it is non-luminous. The latter two theses, in particular, are clearly at odds with a fallibilistic conception of knowledge. Given that fallibilism has been a very popular view, I think this is a serious problem for Williamson's epistemological program. I do not see any easy solution to this problem.

IV. KNOW VS. SHNOW

That Williamson's epistemological program is widely at odds with any fallibilistic framework suggests the possibility that there might be two concepts at play.

The concept of knowledge captured in Williamson's framework allows S to know that P while *not* believing that she knows that P as well as to *not* know that P while believing that she knows that P. And, it can explain the phenomenon of dispositional knowledge; for example, S only realizes that S *knows* the number of provinces in Canada only after being asked on a quiz. The mere fact that these concepts make sense at all adds some plausibility to the story Williamson tells. If Williamson's target concept turns out not to be knowledge, nor what we should be after in epistemology, at least his account is a coherent story about some epistemic concept that resides in our pre-theorized conceptual map, and that concept is pronounced enough to deserve a name and some attention.

V. THE CRUX OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology literally means theory of knowledge. However, "knowledge" need not be the crux of epistemology as a discipline of inquiry. Analogously, ethics may be characterized as a theory of good conduct but need not focus on the study of good conduct; it could, for example, focus on the study of right and wrong. It is also important to acknowledge that "knowledge" and "the crux of epistemology" need not be the same. The merging of the two

concepts might very well be the source of the multiplicity of the concept. That is, that “knowledge” covers two different concepts might be explained in terms of the mistake of identifying a newly formed crux of epistemology – the fallibilistic notion of knowledge – with an old crux of epistemology, knowledge – the infallibilistic notion of knowledge.

Put in another way, if “knowledge” indeed covers two concepts, they need not be equally important nor equally useful; and, only one – the useful one – gets the name of “the crux of epistemology”. The fallibilistic notion of knowledge certainly (close to what Williamson would characterize as belief of our knowledge) is more useful for we often act on them and we rely on them to navigate around the actual world. However, usefulness is not stipulated in the concept of knowledge. The infallibilistic notion of knowledge might be more important for these factive mental states are, in a sense, non-luminous matching between the world and the mind.

VI. FINAL REMARK

If we take seriously the idea that the lack of knowledge is ignorance, rather than false belief, Williamson’s epistemological program, as an account that uniquely picks out the concept of knowledge, seems rather promising.

NOTES

1. Williamson, Timothy. “Is Knowledge a State of Mind.” *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 104, No.415 (Jul., 1995), pp. 533-565. p543.
2. Another example of consideration to the same effect is the discussion of the role of knowledge in the causal explanation of action. See chapters 2.4 and 3 in Williamson’s *Knowledge and its Limits*.
3. *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 12.
4. *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 15..
5. See *Knowledge and its Limits*, chapter 8 and 10.
6. Williamson seems to take this to be a basic datum by appealing to some robust intuition. *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 11.
7. Williamson acknowledge this point explicitly in places: *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 12; “Inexact Knowledge”, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 101, No. 402. (Apr., 1992), pp. 217-242; “Knowledge as Evidence”, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 106, No. 424. (Oct., 1997), pp. 717-741.
8. For example, in “Is Knowing a State of Mind”, p. 547-550.
9. See “Is Knowing a State of Mind”.
10. For a thorough discussion of the anti-luminosity argument, see Williamson’s *Knowledge and its Limit*, chapter 4; and, Anthony Bruechner & M. Oreste Fiocco’s “Williamson’s Anti-Luminosity Argument” in *Philosophical Studies* 110: 285-2293, 2002.
11. This is Williamson’s from own example in “Inexact Knowledge”. (1729 is the smallest number in the infinite set of numbers expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.)
12. See *Knowledge and its Limit*, p. 14.
13. See “Knowledge as Evidence”, p. 724.
14. I do not mean a distinction between non-demonstrative knowledge and demonstrative knowledge.