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TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON

Knowledge and its Limits

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Keith DeRose

Department of Philosophy

Yale University

Though he's perhaps best known for his work on vagueness, Timothy Williamson also produced a series of outstanding papers in epistemology in the late 1980's and the 1990's. Knowledge and its Limits brings this work together. The result is, in my opinion, the best book in epistemology to come out since 1975.

Those familiar with Williamson's articles will not find anything startlingly new here. Still, the book is not just a thinly disguised collection of old papers. Much of the material is significantly improved, with important new substantive points added. Beyond those new substantive contributions, Williamson does a good job of drawing his earlier work together into a coherent whole, both by means of explanations of the interconnections between his claims and arguments and by some rearrangement of material: Some of the old papers are broken up and interspersed with material from other papers.

The resulting picture is rich and complicated, reaching into important regions of philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, in addition to

epistemology, but in his Preface, Williamson volunteers: “If I had to summarize this book in two words, they would be: knowledge first” (p. v). A key to Williamson’s approach is that he does not take knowledge to be something to be analyzed, in anything like the traditional way, but something to be used in the elucidation of other concepts. Thus, Williamson argues impressively for important knowledge-based accounts of evidence, evidential probability, and assertion: one’s total evidence is just one’s total knowledge (Chapter 9), the evidential probability of a hypothesis for a subject is its probability conditional on the subject’s knowledge (Chapter 10), and the fundamental constitutive rule of assertion is that one should assert only what one knows (Chapter 11).

Another theme is that of knowledge as a mental state (Chapter 1, ff.). This is related to the “knowledge first” theme because the thought that knowledge is not itself a mental state, but is to be factored into a mental state (perhaps belief) together with some external, non-mental conditions (including truth) is one of the root causes of the attempt to analyze knowledge. Williamson argues that knowledge itself has as good a claim to being a mental state as does believing.

A third theme, closely related to the above two, is that knowledge is important. That importance would be sufficiently established by the already mentioned connections with evidence and assertion. But Williamson also defends the proposal that “knowing is the most general factive stative attitude, that which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all” (p. 34). According to this proposal, seeing that P and remembering that P, for instance, both entail knowing that P. This would show knowledge to be a central concept. Also, against the many who, like Stephen Stich, claim that “what knowledge adds to belief is psychologically irrelevant,”¹ Williamson argues that in many cases,

appealing to the knowledge of a subject provides a superior explanation of the subject's behavior than could be had by reference to her beliefs or to other states that are typically thought capable of supplanting knowledge in such explanations (section 2.4). He concludes: "Knowing can figure ineliminably in causal explanations. It is causally efficacious in its own right if any mental state is" (p. 64).

This is a very ambitious book, calling for a lot of critical scrutiny. Here I will have to focus my critical attention on one quite central matter — Williamson's "anti-luminosity" argument of Chapter 4, which is a centerpiece of his attack on the transparency of the mental.

Knowing, Williamson admits, is not a transparent state: In many imaginable cases, and even in many actual cases, subjects are not in a position to know whether they know something. For instance, Williamson points out, victims of elaborate deceptions fail to know various things, though they're in no position to know that they don't know them (pp. 11-12). This lack of transparency can appear to threaten Williamson's project.

For one thing, it can appear to disqualify knowledge for the role Williamson assigns it in his account of evidence. Doesn't one have to be in a position to know what one's evidence is, in order for it to really function as evidence? Since we can often fail to be in a position to know what it is that we know, how then can we equate our evidence with what we know? Williamson admits that on his account we can fail to be in a position to know what our evidence is, but argues that this is so on any good account of evidence. The demand that one's evidence be something that one is always — even in skeptical scenarios — in a position to know, Williamson claims, "drives evidence to the purely phenomenal" (p. 173).

However, Williamson argues (section 8.6; this argument is structurally similar to the “anti-luminosity” argument I discuss below) that there is nothing that can fill that bill. He concludes, “If the phenomenal is postulated as comprising those conditions of the subject, whatever they are, which are accessible to the subject whenever they obtain . . . then the phenomenal is empty” (p. 178). In light of this, we should ease up on our demands for what can be evidence, and look for something that is characteristically, even if not invariably, accessible to us. Knowledge, Williamson claims, meets that more reasonable demand.

The non-transparency of knowledge can also appear to disqualify knowledge from being a mental state, in some core or primary sense of the phrase, since it can seem that mental states, or at least some core group of central mental states, are transparent. Thus, for example, it can seem that one is always in a position to know whether one is in pain, or whether one feels cold. To say such a condition is transparent is to say that both its obtaining and its not obtaining are, in Williamson’s term, luminous conditions, where a condition C is defined as being luminous if and only if:

For every case α , if in α C obtains, then in α one is in a position to know that C obtains. (p. 95)

Williamson’s response to this challenge is to argue that even states like feeling cold fail to be luminous, and thus transparency and luminosity are not really marks of the mental. He argues by means of this case (analogous cases could be set up for pain and for other mental states):

Consider a morning on which one feels freezing cold at dawn, very slowly warms up, and feels hot by noon. One changes from feeling cold to not feeling cold, and from being in a position to know that one feels cold to not being in a position to know that one feels cold . . .

Suppose that one's feelings of heat and cold change so slowly during this process that one is not aware of any change in them over one millisecond. Suppose also that throughout the process one thoroughly considers how cold or hot one feels. One's confidence that one feels cold gradually decreases. One's initial answers to the question 'Do you feel cold?' are firmly positive; then hesitations and qualifications creep in, until one gives neutral answers such as 'It's hard to say'; then one begins to dissent, with gradually decreasing hesitations and qualifications; one's final answers are firmly negative.

Let t_0, t_1, \dots, t_n be a series of times at one millisecond intervals from dawn to noon. Let α_i be the case at t_i ($0 \leq i \leq n$). (pp. 96-97)

The key premise that Williamson utilizes is:

If in α_i one knows that one feels cold, then in α_{i+1} one feels cold.

This premise spells the doom of the thought that feeling cold is a luminous condition, for it together with the luminosity of feeling cold leads to a false conclusion. For start with a time early on in the sequence, where one is in a position to know that one feels cold and, because one is considering the matter, actually does know that one feels cold. (Williamson uses "in a position to know")

in such a way that if one is in a position to know, one only has to turn one's attention to the matter to know.) By Williamson's premise, then, one feels cold at the next time in the sequence. But then, by luminosity, one is in a position to know that one feels cold at that next moment, and since one is still considering the matter, one does know that one feels cold at that next moment. But then, by repeated applications of Williamson's premise and luminosity, one can conclude that one knows that one feels cold at the still next time after that one, and so on, all the way to noon. So one knows that one feels cold at noon. But that's false: one feels hot at noon! Something has gone wrong. Given Williamson's premise, the culprit must be the claim that feeling cold is a luminous condition.

I accept Williamson's premise as applied to his case (though I would defend it in a slightly different way), and thus his argument, and so will not scrutinize his defense of that premise (see pp. 97, 98-102). However, even granted the soundness of Williamson's argument, there is an important and attractive move open to friends of luminosity: They can, and should, admit that the luminosity of mental states can fail, but only at the edges of condition C. Thus, though feeling cold may not be luminous, it is still (friends of luminosity can claim) weakly luminous, where a condition C is weakly luminous if and only if:

For every case α , if in α C safely obtains, then in α one is in a position to know that C obtains,

where by a condition's safely obtaining in a case, we mean that the condition obtains and is not even close to not obtaining in the case — the case doesn't occur in the vicinity of the borderline between C's obtaining and its not obtaining. Of

course, this would all have to be worked out more thoroughly, but, of course, it could be. The resulting claim, that mental states are weakly luminous, and weakly transparent (where, predictably enough, a condition is weakly transparent if and only if both its obtaining and its not obtaining are weakly luminous), could not be refuted by Williamson's argument, which depends crucially on what happens near the borderlines of the relevant conditions. But the (toned down) claim that some central core of mental states are weakly transparent is all that's needed to challenge Williamson's claim that knowing is such a mental state, since, as I'm fairly confident Williamson would admit, knowing is not even weakly transparent: Some victims of elaborate deceptions are not even close to knowing various items that they're in no position to know that they don't know.²

Notes

1. Stich, "Autonomous Psychology and the Belief-Desire Thesis," The Monist 61 (1978): 573-91, p. 574; quoted by Williamson at p. 55.

2. I actually suspect that knowing may be weakly luminous -- though before we could really evaluate this claim, we would have to get clear on the details of what is meant by saying a condition safely obtains. Williamson might share this suspicion, since the case he gives against the luminosity of knowing (pp. 114-119; this is put forward as an argument against a "KK" principle, but will work against luminosity, and is cited on p. 11 as establishing such a conclusion) seems not to work against the weak luminosity of knowing. However, since not knowing fails to be even weakly luminous (as various victims of deception show), knowing is not weakly transparent.