

Phil. 270 2/13/20: If knowledge is first, who's on second?

Knowledge might play a starring role in accounts of . . .

- a. what one's evidence is: Williamson: $E=K$
- b. evidential/epistemic probability
- c. assertion—either in an account of what that speech act is (Williamson), or, less ambitiously, in an account of when one is in a position to do it.
- d. belief / personal certainty (as the “attitude of knowledge”)
- e. (epistemic) justification of belief
- f. (epistemic) possibility / (impersonal) certainty
- g. various evaluations/explanations/predictions of actions/practical reasoning
 - for a-c, see 1 (my summary of Williamson)
 - for d-e, see 2-3 (but also consider the “epistemic twin” account of e.j.)
 - for f, see 5
 - for g, see 6

-Why go the “knowledge first” route?

- the reports of Boyd & Nagel on pp. 2-3 of their paper would certainly seem to support the procedure.
- Williamson seems largely moved by the failure of the traditional approach (p. 4)

-“swaying together”: see passage 5

1. From my summary of Williamson's book:

[I]n the 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. --review of Williamson's *KAIL*, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 53 (2002): 573-577; p. 573

2. Williamson on belief & knowledge:

The received idea is that we can conceptualize the factors whose conjunction with belief is necessary and sufficient for knowledge independently of knowledge; we can think of the former without already thinking of the latter, even implicitly. But the argument does not show that such independent conceptualization is possible, for a necessary but insufficient condition need not be a conjunct of a non-circular necessary and sufficient condition. . . .

Thus belief can be a necessary but insufficient condition of knowledge even if we do not implicitly conceptualize knowledge as the conjunction of belief with that which must be added to belief to yield knowledge. Perhaps the inference from knowledge to belief derives from a conceptualization of belief in terms of knowledge rather than from a conceptualization of knowledge in terms of belief. If believing p is conceptualized as being in a state sufficiently like knowing p ‘from the inside’ in the relevant respects, then belief is necessary for knowledge, since knowing p is sufficiently like itself in every respect, even though knowledge is conceptually prior to belief.

--*Knowledge and Its Limits*, p. 3

3. Steven L. Reynolds on justification & knowledge:

Justification, let us say, is how knowledge appears to the knower, how it seems “from the inside.” More formally: S is justified in believing that p if and only if it really appears to S that he has knowledge that p. --“Evaluational Illusions and Skeptical Arguments,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 529-558; p. 531.

4. various factive states:

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 toward it at all” (p. 34). According to this proposal, seeing that P and remembering that P, for instance, both entail knowing that P. –also from my review of Williamson’s book, p. 574

5. on epistemic possibility and impersonal certainty (with hints of more):

Contextualism, again, is a thesis about knowledge attributing and denying sentences. But since there are other terms with tight ties to the concept of knowledge, we should expect that if contextualism about knowledge is true, there should be corresponding shifts in the content of sentences containing those other terms, especially if the ties between the terms are very tight, and very especially if the other terms are properly analyzed in terms of knowledge. To use David Lewis’s words (though he wasn’t writing about “knows” when he used them), we should expect the content of knowledge attributing sentences and the sentences containing the other terms to “sway together.”¹ For instance, to a first approximation, at least, “It’s possible that P_{ind}”² is true if and only if the speaker of the sentence doesn’t know that P is false.³ Given contextualism, then, we should expect that, as the standards for knowledge go up, making it harder for belief to count as knowledge, it should become easier for such statements of “epistemic possibility” to be true.⁴ And, since “It’s certain that P” is the dual of “It’s possible that P_{ind}” (“It’s certain that P” is true if and only if “It possible that not-P_{ind}” is false), we should expect that as the standards for knowledge go up, making it harder for knowledge attributions to be true, it should also become harder for such expressions of impersonal certainty to be true.⁵ –KDR, *The Case for Contextualism*, pp. 19-20

6. explanations of behavior:

A burglar spends all night ransacking a house, risking discovery by staying so long. We ask what features of the situation when he entered the house led to that result. A reasonable answer is that he knew there was a diamond in the house. To say just that he believed truly that there was a diamond in the house would be to give a worse explanation. –Williamson, *KAIL*, p. 62

¹ Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Harvard UP, 1973), p. 92; the full sentence, and the sentence which precedes it, which are about the link between similarity and counterfactual conditionals, read: “I am not one of those philosophers who seek to rest fixed distinctions upon a foundation quite incapable of supporting them. I rather seek to rest an unfixed distinction upon a swaying foundation, claiming that the two sway together rather than independently.”

² The subscript “ind” indicates that the embedded P is to be kept in the indicative mood: very different possibilities are expressed where the P is subjunctive. The subjunctive, “It’s possible that I should not have existed,” is just plain good sense, while the indicative “It’s possible that I don’t exist” is bizarre.

³ A more exact analysis of the sentence would still involve the concept of knowledge in a way that, though more complicated, doesn’t ruin the point I’m making. See my “Epistemic Possibilities” (*Philosophical Review*, 1991) for such a more exact analysis.

⁴ For more on contextualism and statements of possibility, see Chapter 2, section V of my (1990) dissertation and pp. 69-72 of my “Simple Might, Indicative Possibilities, and the Open Future” (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 1998).

⁵ Though “It’s certain that P” is the dual of “It’s possible that P_{ind}”, it doesn’t mean just that the speaker knows that P, because the provisional analysis of “It’s possible that P_{ind}” as simply being a matter of the speaker not knowing otherwise is just a first approximation, and so isn’t exactly correct. For a more exact account of the meaning of “It’s certain that P,” see pp. 78-79 of “Simple Might ...” Expressions of the form “S is certain that...”, where S is a subject — expressions of personal certainty — of course, are a very different matter.