

Does evidence = knowledge?

1. What is evidence?

When you believe that p on the basis of your evidence e , what sorts of things could constitute e ?

- your *beliefs*? All of them? Only the true beliefs? Only the justified true beliefs?
- your *memories*? Including your apparent memories?
- your *perceptual experiences*? Including the non-veridical ones?¹

Williamson's alternative:

- *knowledge*, and *only knowledge*, constitutes evidence ($E=K$)

Notice that the other usual suggestions for what constitutes evidence – beliefs, memories, perceptual experiences, etc. – are mental states. Knowledge seems to differ from these, because the concept of knowledge is generally taken to combine a mental state (i.e. a belief) with a non-mental factor (the truth of the proposition believed) and other conditions. But on Williamson's account, knowledge *is* a mental state.

2. Background to Williamson on knowledge

2.1 Knowing as a mental state

Everyone who thinks that belief is a component of knowledge accepts that knowledge *involves* a mental state. But Williamson's claim goes further: he argues that knowing *is itself* a mental state:

“the claim that knowing is a state of mind is to be understood as the claim that there is a mental state being in which is necessary *and sufficient* for knowing p . In short, knowing is *merely* a state of mind.”

2.2 Knowing as factive

Notice that if knowing is a mental state, it is a mental state that one can only have towards truths. Knowing is factive, in that same way that seeing and remembering are: one can only see that p if p is true and one can only remember that p if p is true, just as one can only know that p if p is true. Williamson claims that knowing is the most general factive mental state operator, such that all other factive mental state operators entail knowing.

2.3 Knowing as broad

But how can knowledge be a mental state, given that it involves an external state of affairs, i.e. that the proposition in question be true? Williamson appeals to externalism about the content of mental states to argue that if the content of mental states can depend on the external world, so can the attitudes to those contents. Attitudes, just like contents, he claims, can be broad. And factive mental states like seeing, remembering, and knowing, are broad – regardless of whether their contents are.

¹ The question of whether one's evidence must be propositional in form will be discussed next week.

2.4 Knowing as prime

Where does this leave the standard project of analyzing knowledge into its component parts? Knowledge is generally taken to be a composite of a narrow condition (i.e. belief) with an environmental condition, but Williamson argues instead that the concept of knowledge is not composite but rather prime (where something is prime iff it is not composite). Williamson proposes that all previous attempts to analyze the concept of knowledge have been unsuccessful, and suggests a different approach to epistemology in which the concept of knowledge is taken as basic and unanalyzable. Instead of using the concepts of belief, justification, evidence, etc. to explain knowledge, Williamson starts from knowledge and attempts to show how we can explain the rest of our epistemological concepts from there.

2.5 Knowing as non-luminous

One worry over the idea of knowing as a mental state is that we are often said to have special access to our mental states; in particular, it is generally thought that we can know without observation what mental state we are in. If this is true, then it is hard to see how Williamson can claim that knowing is a mental state. Williamson argues against this idea that mental states are 'luminous'.

Luminosity: a condition is luminous if, whenever it obtains, one is in a position to know that it obtains.

The main idea behind Williamson's argument against luminosity is that we have limited powers of discrimination:

"If we are in case α , and there is a case α' which is close enough to α , then for all we know we are in α' . Thus what we are in a position to know in α is still true in α'For almost any condition of interest, the cases in which it obtains are linked by a series of imperceptible gradations to cases in which it does not obtain, where at every step we are in a position to wonder whether it obtains. The condition is therefore not luminous."²

Williamson argues that most mental states, including knowledge, are non-luminous: just as you can want something without being in a position to know that you want it, you can know something without being in a position to know when you know that you know it. Similarly, you can fail to know something without being in a position to know that you fail to know it.

2.6 Summary

According to Williamson's account of knowledge, knowing is the most general factive mental state. It is broad rather than narrow, prime rather than composite, and non-luminous rather than luminous.

3. Williamson on evidence

3.1 Williamson's argument for E=K

Williamson sets out his argument schematically as follows:

1. All evidence is propositional.
2. All propositional evidence is knowledge.
3. All knowledge is evidence.
- C. All and only knowledge is evidence.

² See Chapter 4 of Williamson's *Knowledge and its Limits* (2000) for the full details of the argument against luminosity.

Premise 1 will be discussed next week.

Premise 3 is relatively uncontroversial, just stating that if you know that p , then p can be used as evidence for a belief that q .

Premise 2, however, states that *all* of one's evidence is knowledge: a belief that p , a memory that p , a perceptual experience of p , etc. are not evidence for your belief that q unless you know that p .

Three points to bear in mind:

- $E=K$ doesn't equate the *concepts* of evidence and knowledge or attempt to analyze either concept: $E=K$ merely equates the *extensions* of E and K
- while Williamson's argument for $E=K$ is an a priori one, he doesn't claim that $E=K$ must be knowable a priori
- $E=K$ puts forward an externalist theory of evidence, in that one's evidence doesn't supervene on one's internal states – although it does supervene on one's mental states

3.2 Williamson's argument for why only knowledge can constitute evidence

A summary of the argument:

You see a number of balls drawn from a bag in succession, and each one is replaced in the bag before the next one is drawn. You have seen draws 1 to n (for some suitable value of n); in each case the ball was red. Draw $n+1$ has been made but you haven't seen the color of the ball. By reasoning probabilistically, you form a justified belief that the ball drawn was red, and it happens to be true that the ball drawn was red, but you don't know that the ball drawn was red.

Williamson asks us to consider whether either of two (false) hypotheses is consistent with your evidence at this point:

h : Draws 1 to n were red; draw $n+1$ was black.

h^* : Draw 1 was black; draws 2 to $n+1$ were red.

It seems natural to say that h is consistent with my evidence, but h^* is inconsistent with my evidence. But if h is consistent with your evidence, then your justified true belief that ball $n+1$ is red can't be part of your evidence because it contradicts h .

Williamson suggests that what prevents your justified true belief from counting as evidence is that it isn't sufficient for knowledge:

"the unsatisfied necessary condition for evidence is knowledge... It is hard to see how evidence could discriminate between hypotheses in the way we want it to if it did not have to be known."

3.3 Identifying our evidence

If $E=K$, then by the anti-luminosity argument that Williamson used to show that we're not always in a position to know whether or not we're in the mental state of knowing, it follows that our evidence is not transparent to us: we are fallible when it comes to identifying what our evidence is.³

Williamson claims that although we might treat a false proposition as if it were evidence, this does not make it evidence: the most our evidence could be in such a case is the true proposition that things *appear* to be such a way.

³ Williamson actually argues for this view – that we're not always in position to know what our evidence is – independently of $E=K$ in a previous chapter.

3.4 Williamson's view of evidence and justification

The argument for $E=K$ says nothing about the concept of justification. What consequences $E=K$ has for the role of justification in epistemology will ultimately depend upon the relationship between evidence and justification. If *evidentialism* is correct, for example, justification supervenes on evidence (more precisely, a person is justified in believing p at time t iff their evidence for p at t supports believing p) and so it would follow from $E=K$ that only one's knowledge can play the role of justifying one's beliefs. If, however, there's more to justification than evidence, then $E=K$ is consistent with something besides knowledge playing a justificatory role. Williamson acknowledges this at the end of his chapter on evidence. Taking himself to have demonstrated that $E=K$ by this point, he concludes that "*If evidence is what justifies belief, then knowledge is what justifies belief*" (my italics).

Williamson himself takes an evidentialist position. He allows that the pragmatic justification of belief need not be by evidence, but argues that the (truth-directed) epistemic justification of beliefs can only be by evidence. He suggests that $E=K$ supports the equation of truth-directed justification with justification by evidence, on the grounds that if anything we know can be evidence, "then evidence plausibly suffices for all truth-directed justification". He claims that evidentialism only seems mistaken when the concept of evidence is conceived wrongly (as interiorized, always accessible, etc.).

4. Comesana and Kantin's objections

4.1 Comesana and Kantin's dialectic

Comesana and Kantin (C&K) argue that $E=K$ is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases, and that it entails that a plausible principle of justificatory closure fails. They further claim that there are Gettier cases and that justificatory closure holds, and therefore deny that $E=K$.

C&K understand $E=K$ as claiming that something is part of S 's evidence if and only if it is a proposition that S knows. Importantly, however, they claim that $E=K$ "follows from the conjunction of the following two other claims" made by Williamson:

- $E=K$ 1: The proposition that p justifies S in believing that q only if S knows that p
- $E=K$ 2: Something is part of S 's evidence only if it is a proposition that justifies S in believing some proposition q

C&K's argument concentrates on showing how the existence of Gettier cases and the closure of justification are incompatible with $E=K$ 1, and so they reject $E=K$ 1. They further claim that without $E=K$ 1, there is no reason to accept $E=K$.

This is a misunderstanding of Williamson's argument. Williamson first argues for $E=K$ without relying on any idea of justification or its relationship to knowledge. Only when he takes himself to have proved $E=K$ does he turn to the relationship between evidence and justification, to argue that if only evidence can justify belief, then only knowledge can justify belief. $E=K$ 1 is a consequence of $E=K$ and further evidentialist-style reasoning. If C&K give us reason to reject $E=K$ 1, then we don't have to reject $E=K$; we could instead reject the claim that whatever justifies our beliefs must be evidence.

4.2 Gettier cases

A standard Gettier case:

Smith and Jones both go for a job interview. Afterwards, Smith hears the secretary say that Jones has got the job. He also sees Jones counting the ten coins in his pocket. Smith

comes to believe that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. Unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket, and the secretary was wrong: Smith has got the job. Smith's belief that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket is generally taken to be an example of justified true belief which fails to be knowledge.

C&K point out that if we accept the existence of Gettier cases, then we accept that Smith's belief (that whoever got the job has ten coins in their pocket) is a justified belief. But what justifies Smith in that belief is his *false* belief that Jones got the job. According to Williamson, only knowledge justifies belief: therefore $E=K$ 1 is incompatible with the standard Gettier case. C&K argue that not only do Gettier cases exist, but also that Williamson himself relies on the existence of Gettier cases to motivate his view of knowledge: the failure of all attempts to analyze knowledge into true belief, justification, etc. is, according to C&K, the only reason to think that the concept of knowledge may be unanalyzable.

4.3 A response to C&K on Gettier cases

Thinking about this in terms of evidence, recall that Williamson portrays our access to our evidence as fallible. In the Gettier case above, Smith uses his false belief that Jones got the job as evidence for his true belief that whoever got the job has ten coins in their pocket. But although Smith uses his false belief as evidence, it is not evidence: his actual evidence in this case consists only of propositions he knows. Smith's actual evidence in this case is the proposition that the secretary said Jones had got the job. Does this justify his true belief that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket? Williamson's answer to this would presumably be to say that Smith is justified to the extent that his evidence supports his belief: the more probable that Smith's evidence makes his belief, the more justified he is in holding that belief. But this seems to pave the way for an opponent to argue that since Smith isn't completely justified in this case, then it's still possible that the concept of knowledge should be analyzed as justified true belief, and the Gettier case isn't a counterexample.⁴

Should this bother Williamson? I suggest not. If C&K are right that Williamson requires that there are counterexamples to the $K=JTB$ account to motivate his alternative, then Williamson can provide them: in the case of the balls being drawn from the bag, the observer has a justified true belief that the $n+1$ draw was a red ball but doesn't know it. However, I don't even think that Williamson requires such counterexamples to motivate his view of knowledge. *One* motivation for developing an unanalyzable concept of knowledge is certainly that attempts at analysis have failed, but there other motivations: consider the ability of the account to respond to skepticism, or the way it enables us to think about the relationships between knowledge and justification, belief, evidence, etc.

4.4 The closure of justification

C&K argue that $E=K$ 1 is not consistent with a "very plausible principle of the closure of epistemic justification under competent deduction".

J-Closure:

If S is justified in believing that p and S competently deduces that q from p , thereby coming to believe that q , without ceasing to be justified in believing that p , then S is justified in believing that q .

C&K extend the Gettier case used previously to highlight a case where they think everyone would agree there is justificatory closure, but in which closure would fail under $E=K$ 1:

⁴ For Williamson, a belief is completely justified if and only if it constitutes knowledge.

Smith has a justified true belief (but not knowledge) that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Smith then competently deduces that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket. Is Smith justified in believing that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket?

Under closure, and according to most intuitions, Smith does seem to be justified. However, E=K 1 states that only knowledge can justify, and Smith's later belief is justified by his earlier belief which (although true) did not constitute knowledge.

4.5 A response to C&K on closure

Again, think about this case in terms of evidence. Williamson would presumably say that Smith's evidence for his belief that whoever gets the job has money in his pocket is the same as his evidence for his belief that whoever gets the job has ten coins in his pocket (plus maybe some extra knowledge about deduction). Again, he might think that his evidence for the later belief is the earlier belief, but that would be to misidentify his evidence according to Williamson.

On Williamson's views about the relationship between evidence and justification (E=K 1), if the two beliefs (one about 'ten coins', one about 'money') are equally supported by the evidence then they are equally justified. Justificatory closure holds in this case, contra C&K.

4.6 Summary

Comesana and Kantin misinterpret Williamson's argument, and assume that his concept of evidence already builds in a notion of justification. By reformulating their cases in Williamson's view of evidence, it becomes clear that they offer no immediate threat to E=K. By focusing on E=K 1, however, C&K do bring out a tension between the notion of justification we get from Williamson if justification supervenes on evidence, and some of our other intuitions about justification.

5. Evidence, justification and the skeptical hypothesis

5.1 Williamson on skepticism

Williamson thinks that his account of knowledge and evidence gives him a new response to the skeptic. He argues that the skeptical argument is premised on the idea that whether we're in the 'good' case (we're not in a skeptical scenario) or the 'bad' case (we're a brain-in-a-vat), we have exactly the same evidence in both. The skeptic argues that whatever piece of evidence you present to support your belief that you're in the good case, you'd have exactly the same evidence in the bad case. Since the evidence is insufficient for knowledge in the bad case, it must be insufficient for knowledge in the good case.

On Williamson's account, you don't have the same evidence in the good case as in the bad case. He argues that the skeptic can only claim that the evidence in the good and bad cases must be the same on the grounds that we'd be able to tell if it wasn't the same – but this is to assume that we're always in a position to know what our evidence is. Under E=K, the skeptic's opening move of assuming that the *evidence* is the same in the good and bad cases would entail that the subject's *knowledge* is the same in the good and bad cases: but this is to beg the very question at stake.

5.2 Schiffer on skepticism

Schiffer argues that while Williamson may have given us reason to think that the subject in the good and bad cases does not have the same evidence, he has not given us reason to think that what justifies the subject's belief (e.g. that they are perceiving a red cube) is the same in the good and bad cases. And Schiffer thinks this is a problem because skeptical arguments may well

assume sameness of evidence, but they also assume sameness of justification: the skeptic relies on the idea that whatever justifies your knowledge in the good case is what justifies your belief in the bad case.

5.3 Back to the relationship between justification and evidence

According to Williamson, evidence (and therefore knowledge) is what justifies our beliefs. So how could there be a difference in the subject's evidence in the good and bad cases without a corresponding difference in the subject's justification?

Schiffer thinks that Williamson doesn't consider the distinction between the evidence being a justification one *has* for believing that p, and what justifies one *in* believing that p.

Schiffer's 'Coke machine' example:

"I infer, and thereby come to know, that the Coke machine is sold out from the fact that the machine's 'Sold Out' sign is lit. I would be justified in inferring that the machine is sold out from the fact that it says it's sold out whether or not the machine is sold out; but, as I've no other way in the circumstances of inferring that the machine is sold out, I justifiably wouldn't believe that the machine was sold out unless I inferred that from the fact that the machine says it's sold out. Now, in the circumstances, the fact that the Coke machine is sold out is conclusive independent evidence for me that the Coke machine is sold out, but that isn't what justifies me in believing that the machine is sold out. What justifies me in believing that is that the machine says it's sold out. So, once again, we see that E can be conclusive independent evidence for P for S yet incapable of justifying S in believing P."

Similarly, Schiffer thinks that in the good case, my evidence can provide the justification I *have* for my belief (e.g. that I'm perceiving a red cube) without necessarily justifying me *in* my belief. But it is this latter idea of justification which is important, Schiffer claims, in the skeptical scenarios.