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Author(s): Graham Priest
Review by: Graham Priest
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BOOK REVIEWS

Knowledge and Its Limits. TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xi + 340 p. Cloth $39.95, paper $19.95.

Timothy Williamson is perhaps best known for his views concerning the epistemic nature of vagueness. In the present book, knowledge itself comes under his microscope. His book articulates and defends a conception of the nature of knowledge—or at least, knowing *that*; it has little to say on knowing *how*, knowing *who*, and so forth[1]—and applies the result to a variety of related issues. It refashions and melds together a dozen or so papers that Williamson has written on the topic in the last ten years, to produce a very distinctive vision of the nature of knowledge. The book displays notable originality, and is carefully and cleverly argued. The resources of formal logic and probability theory are brought to bear where appropriate, more technical material of this kind being relegated to five appendices.

Traditional accounts factorize knowledge into two components, a subjective one, belief, plus an objective one, the appropriate relation to the world. This book rejects such an analysis. Knowledge is a *sui generis* mental state. Chapter 1 explains this conception of knowledge, and attacks various arguments to the effect that knowledge is not a purely mental state—as well as some claims concerning the nature of first-person authority on which such arguments depend. Chapter 2 disposes of some further arguments to the same end. Whether a mental state is one of knowledge certainly does depend on the cooperation of the world; however, the thought that the contents of our mental states depend on the external world is now a familiar one to philosophers, and, the chapter argues, the dependence of knowledge on the external world requires an externalism no more objectionable than that. Chapter 3 then goes on to the attack, and provides an ingenious argument against any analysis of knowledge into internal and external components.

Having defended his conception of knowledge from infanticide, the next several chapters go on to elaborate its properties. Chapter 4 argues that, quite generally, one's mental states are such that one cannot always know when one is in them. The argument is a sorites-

[1] But see Jason Stanley and Williamson, "Knowing How," this JOURNAL, XCVIII, 8 (August 2001): pp. 411–44.

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like argument, and depends on the margin of error principle, of which more anon. The last couple of pages of the chapter draw, almost nonchalantly, a simple corollary which, if right, lays waste Dummettian antirealism. Chapter 5 draws another corollary of the argument, the rejection of the KK principle (if you know something, then you know that you know it), and discusses various connections between knowledge, reliability and the margin of error principle. Chapter 6 applies the results of these cogitations to the surprise exam paradox, arguing that the students in question start with the knowledge that there will be a surprise exam, but lose it as the days go on—and not because they forget things. Chapter 7 attacks "sensitive" accounts of knowledge—that is, those according to which, if you know p then the following conditional is true: if p had not been true, you would not have believed that p. It rejects this conditional and its variations.

Chapter 8 takes skepticism in its sights. Consider two people—one is you sitting in a chair; the other is a brain in a vat receiving identical sensory stimulation. Both of you believe yourselves to be sitting in a chair. According to the account of knowledge just developed, because you have the appropriate relation to the external world, you know that you are sitting in a chair, whilst your envatted doppelgänger does not. Skepticism solved. Since knowledge must be based on evidence, it follows that the two parties do not have the same evidence. It follows that evidence is not to be identified with that with which one is presented phenomenologically. What, then, is evidence? Chapter 9 argues that something is evidence if and only if it is known.

These conclusions challenge certain standard ideas concerning probability and evidence, and specifically the thought that we update our beliefs by conditionalization. If this were correct, knowledge could not be lost (as we have seen it can be). Chapter 10 provides a different account of conditionalization: the novel probability of p is the old probability of p, conditional upon the conjunction of the new evidence and *what remains of* the old evidence (220). (This is one place where Williamson is less than clear. The phrase 'what remains of' is omitted, making the subsequent discussion hard to follow. The situation is not helped by a typo: 'e_w' on l. 6 should be 'e_α'.) Assuming that one should assert that for which one has evidence (and only that), it follows from the preceding considerations, that one should assert what one knows (and only that). This conclusion is defended in chapter 11.

Chapter 12, which has only a loose connection with what has gone before, defends the claim that there are unknowable truths, by articulating and defending the well-known Fitch argument to the

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effect that if one assumes that everything true is knowable, it follows that everything true is known.

Williamson's views are novel, provocative, and raise many interesting issues. There is no space here to take many of them up. In what follows, I will take up just one—though an important one. Perhaps the central feature of Williamson's view of knowledge is its strong externalism. You and the brain in the vat have the same phenomenological experiences, but you know that you are sitting in a chair whilst the brain does not. I want to bring this thought to bear on the margin of error principle, which, as stated by Williamson,[2] is as follows:

> '*A*' is true in all cases similar to cases in which 'It is known that *A*' is true (*ibid.*, p. 227).

This principle is a central plank of Williamson's view concerning vagueness: it allows him to explain why we cannot know exactly where the sharp cut-off point is in a soritical progression, even though there is one. Suppose that a vague sentence, *A*, changes from true to false between two adjacent points, *i* and *j*. If one knew that *A* were true at *i*, by the margin of error principle, it would have to be true at *j*, which it is not.

The natural rationale for the margin of error principle depends on the fact that knowledge supervenes on evidence. If two situations present the same evidence, for example, by being phenomenologically indistinguishable, then I cannot know that *A* holds in one but not in the other. In other words, if *A* holds in one but not the other, then any judgment I make about it in these situations must be a guess. Now, in response to the skeptic, Williamson has argued that there is more to evidence than is phenomenologically present. Things can appear the same to two people phenomenologically; yet one can know something and the other not. The one phenomenology counts as evidence precisely because it is knowledge. In the same way, someone can have the evidence that *A* holds at *i*, but not have the evidence that it holds at *j* precisely because *A* is knowledge. Once we are strong externalists about the conditions for knowledge, the situations at *i* and *j* are *not* similar.

Williamson often defends the margin of error principle by appealing to reliability. For example, he says:

> The intuitive idea is that if one believes outright to some degree that condition *C* obtains, when in fact it does, and at a very slightly later time one believes outright on a very similar basis to a very slightly lower

[2] *Vagueness* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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> degree that *C* obtains, when in fact it does not, then one's earlier belief is not reliable enough to constitute knowledge. The earlier case is sufficiently similar to the later case (101).

Now, as we have seen, the situations at *i* and *j* may not be similar in the relevant sense. One might still argue, however, that the first belief is not knowledge since it is not reliable, as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that a person will not make the same judgment on different occasions. But it seems to me that there may well be people who do make the same judgment about some vague situation on different occasions—I have, to my own surprise, found myself doing this sometimes. And even if there are not such people, there could be. (Recall that the epistemicist about vagueness wants to argue not just that the cut-off point is unknown, but that it is unknow*able*.) Of course, different people may also make different judgments about the same situation. But that is okay too. The one whose judgment is right knows; the other does not. Even if there is variation in the judgments of individuals, or of the same individual on different occasions, that is still okay. It may just show that vague words have a certain kind of context-dependence (not an implausible view). The person, relative to the context, may make the right judgment, and know that they have done so, even if the judgments are different in different contexts. Differences in judgments, therefore, even if they occur, are quite compatible with reliability. It would seem, then, that the epistemicist's argument as to why we cannot know the location of a cut-off point is in trouble.

As I pointed out above, the margin of error principle is also employed by Williamson to argue for various of his claims about knowledge. It would also seem, therefore, that his view about the nature of knowledge also threatens to undercut some of those arguments. That does not, of course, show that the view is wrong. And I think that Williamson's view has sufficient attractiveness and robustness to survive a problem of this kind. Williamson has shown us what it is like to be a serious and thoroughgoing externalist about knowledge. Before reading the book I would not have thought such a view a serious possibility. Now I do.

GRAHAM PRIEST

University of Melbourne

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