

Knowledge and its Limits, by Timothy Williamson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 332.

Review by Richard Foley

Knowledge and Its Limits is a magnificent book that is certain to be influential for a very long time. It develops positions on an unusually broad range of topics (the nature of mental states, knowledge, justification, evidence, warranted assertability, externalism and internalism, the iteration of knowledge; epistemic transparency; skepticism, probability) and offers distinctive, carefully crafted arguments in defense of these positions.

Williamson sees himself as developing a new, ‘knowledge first’ approach to epistemology. At the core of his approach is the thesis that knowing is a mental state and, indeed, a *sui generis* mental state, which cannot be adequately understood as a combination of internal conditions (for example, believing or believing with justification) and external conditions (for example, the environmental conditions that make the belief true). Because the concept *knows* picks out a *sui generis* mental state, Williamson feels free to make use of it, without threat of circularity, in developing accounts of evidence, justification, warranted assertability, and many other important epistemological concepts.

Williamson employs a negative strategy to defend the thesis that knowing is a *sui generis* mental state. He argues that the contrary view is motivated by indefensible assumptions and that in exposing the indefensibility of these assumptions, he shifts the burden of proof. One of these assumptions is that knowing has an external component and, as such, cannot be primarily mental. Williamson counters by arguing that beliefs, which most everyone will grant are mental, are not wholly internal either and, hence, internality cannot be a test of the mental. He relies on what is by now a familiar line of argument, based on natural language semantics, to defend the idea that believing is not wholly internal. The argument emphasizes that the referents of terms within natural languages are determined at least in part by environmental conditions. Had these conditions been different, the referents of the terms would have been different. On twin earth, the sentence ‘There are tigers’ would have referred

not to tigers but schmigers, which are tiger-like creatures in appearance but quite different in evolutionary ancestry and inner constitution. Because thinking and believing are pervaded by language, environmental conditions play a role in determining their referents as well. Had an individual S been on twin earth rather than earth, S's thoughts and beliefs would not have about tigers but rather about schmigers. Thus, the contents of S's thoughts and beliefs are not wholly determined by internal conditions. This conclusion might not be so damaging if internalists had some plausible way of identifying a core of internal states that are purely mental, but Williamson insists that they do not. (pp. 51-54).

Other assumptions that might suggest that knowing is not a mental state are equally unconvincing, according to Williamson, for example, the assumption that knowing does not play a role in the explanation of action in the way that believing does. Williamson replies that knowing can play such a role and, indeed, actions often can only be explained by citing what subjects know, not what they believe or even what they truly believe (pp 60-64). Another assumption is that subjects are always in a position to know which mental states they are in whereas they often lack such access to what they know. Williamson answers that virtually no mental states enjoy this kind of transparency and, thus, the lack of such transparency cannot be used to deny that knowing is a mental state either (pp. 93-109).

Of course, as Williamson himself recognizes, even if he is correct in rejecting all of the above assumptions, it might still be the case that knowing is best understood as a mixture of mental and non-mental elements, for example, justified belief, truth and some other condition to handle Gettier problems. He insists, however, that no one has yet succeeded in providing a convincing account of knowing in terms of such a mixture of conditions, and he further claims that the amount of effort that has been devoted to producing such an account without success is at least *prima facie* evidence that no such account is possible (pp 27-33).

Once he has established to his satisfaction that knowing is *sui generis*, Williamson feels entitled, without threat of circularity, to use the concept of *knowing* as a tool to understand other epistemological concepts. One of his central theses is that if the usual order is reversed and knowledge rather than justified belief is regarded as fundamental, it becomes possible to provide appealingly simple and enlightening accounts of a wide range of key epistemological notions.

Much of the attention that Williamson's book is sure to attract will focus on his claim that knowing is a *sui generis* mental state, and rightly so, since Williamson himself thinks that the epistemologically distinct positions he defends flow out of this metaphysical position. However, part of the richness of his work is that his attempts to use knowledge to provide accounts of evidence, justified belief, warranted assertability, and other such notions are worth taking seriously regardless of what one makes of his metaphysics of believing and knowing.

Consider, for example, the account of justified belief that Williamson defends. Two theses form the core of this account. The first is that beliefs are justified by one's having evidence for their truth. The second is that one's evidence is co-extensive with what one knows. These theses turn the standard approach, which understands knowledge in terms of justified belief, on its head. Williamson argues that the received view has exhausted itself and that the corrective is to build an account of justified belief out of the concept of knowledge rather than the other way around. I think, however, that Williamson misidentifies the source of the problem. The deepest mistake of the justified true belief tradition is that it fails to recognize that the project of understanding knowledge and that of understanding justified belief are distinct, independent projects. It has been the working hypothesis of the tradition that the concepts of knowing and justified believing are conceptually linked. Williamson continues this mistake. He reverses the direction of the link, but he too insists that knowledge and justified belief are necessarily tied to one another. This is the flaw at the heart of Williamson's account, and a symptom of this flaw is the great difficulty the account has in generating plausible results about what one can justifiably believe in scenarios that involve radical deceit.

For example, consider a variation of the familiar brain in the vat hypothesis. Without his being aware of anything unusual, John's brain has been temporarily placed in a vat, where it is stimulated in just the way that it would have been stimulated had it not been envatted. The brain will be in a vat for a week and then returned to John's body, again without his being unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Stipulating that the period of envatment is brief avoids some complications. For, if the envatment is sufficiently lengthy, then on some externalist accounts of belief content, John's beliefs might well have different referents from what they would have had in normal circumstances. For example, if his brain has been in a

vat for most of his life, John's belief that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout might not be about an ordinary chair, NMR, and laboratory but instead their vat-world counterparts, a stool-in-the-vat, a laboratory-in-the-vat, and so on. On the above scenario, however, the period of envatment is short enough that even assuming an externalist account of belief content, it is not plausible to think that the objects of John's beliefs are anything other than ordinary stools, NMRs, and laboratories.

The familiar internalist worry about brain-in-a-vat scenarios is that from John's perspective they would be indistinguishable from ordinary situations. Were he in a vat, he would not notice anything unusual and, hence, he would believe, as he does now, that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout, but his belief would not constitute knowledge, because it would be false. But if a vat situation is psychologically and evidentially indistinguishable for John from an ordinary situation, how can he know that he is not now in a vat? But if he cannot know that he is not now in a vat, how can he know that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout?

Williamson argues that on his knowledge first approach, worries of this sort largely evaporate, because they can be seen to rest upon the mistaken assumption that John's psychological states and evidence are identical in the above two scenarios. According to Williamson, knowing is every bit as much a mental state as believing or experiencing. So, there is no reason to grant that in the ordinary situation and the vat situation, John's psychological states are identical. In the ordinary situation John is in the mental state of knowing that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory, but in the vat he is not in this state.

These are controversial claims, to be sure, but if accepted, they do accomplish their intended result. They allow Williamson to block a set of arguments with the threatening conclusion that even in the ordinary scenario, John lacks perceptual knowledge of his immediate environment. On the other hand, these same claims create problems for the theory of justified belief. When envatted, John is severely deprived of knowledge of his environment, but because on Williamson's view, one's evidence is co-extensive with what one knows, John is also thereby severely deprived of evidence. And because evidence is what justifies belief, there is much less that John can justifiably believe when envatted. But this runs counter to the

intuition that in an ordinary situation and its brain-in-a-vat counterpart, John's beliefs are justified to exactly the same degree.

Internalists have an easy way of accounting for the intuition that in an ordinary situation and its brain-in-the-vat counterpart, John's beliefs are justified to exactly the same degree. John's psychology and evidence are identical in the pair of situations and, hence, whatever degrees of justification John's beliefs have in one situation, they have identical degrees of justification in the other. Williamson, by contrast, is able to avoid one of the troubling questions that internalists struggle with, the question of how John can have perceptual knowledge of his immediate environment in ordinary situations if his psychology and evidence are identical with they would be in the vat counterpart of these ordinary situations. But his way of avoiding this troubling question comes at the cost of having no obvious way to account for the intuition that in the ordinary scenario and the vat scenario, John's beliefs are justified to the same degree.

There are two aspects of this problem, neither of which admits of an easy solution for Williamson. The first is to account for how John can have justified perceptual beliefs about his immediate environment. The second is to account for how John can be justified in believing a host of other things that are based at least in part on his perceptual beliefs about his immediate environment.

In dealing with the first of the above problems, Williamson has two choices. The first is to say that while in the vat John has knowledge of how things appear to him and such knowledge provides him with sufficient evidence to justify his belief that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout. Likewise, it provides him with sufficient evidence to justify other perceptual beliefs about his environment. In various passages (for example, 198-199), Williamson suggests that this is in fact his view, but conceding this point does undermine one of the principal advantages that an externalist, knowledge first approach might seem to have over an internalist, justification based approach. For if internalists can successfully explain, relying only on internal evidence about appearances, how our perceptual beliefs about the external world are justified both in ordinary scenarios and in vat scenarios, then although it may be reassuring to be told by Williamson that in the ordinary scenario our evidence includes not just internal appearances but also external perceptions, having such external evidence is not necessary to explain why our beliefs are justified.

For the theory of justified belief, it is redundant. Our internal evidence is sufficient to provide us with the justification we seek.

The other possible strategy is simply to bite the bullet and insist that John's belief that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout is not justified in the vat scenario whereas it is justified in the ordinary scenario. However, this kind of response is strained. There may well be different senses of justified belief, but it is difficult to deny that in at least one centrally important sense (important for our everyday assessments of each other's beliefs and important also within the history of epistemology), John's perceptual beliefs about his environment are equally well justified in the above pair of situations. An adequate account of justified belief must come to grips with this sense.

So neither of the strategies open to Williamson for dealing with the first of the above worries is appealing, but the difficulties in dealing with the second worry are if anything even worse. According to Williamson, evidence is what justifies beliefs, and nothing that is not known counts as evidence. Accordingly, even if Williamson is prepared to concede that in the vat scenario, John is justified in believing that he is sitting on a stool in a laboratory holding a NMR readout, John cannot use this belief, or for that matter any other perceptual belief about his immediate environment, as evidence to justify other beliefs. By contrast, in the ordinary case, John can make use of the NMR readout and other perceptual knowledge of his immediate environment to justify an extensive range of further beliefs. For example, if he is using the NMR to study the structure of a particular protein, he may be able to use the readout to justify a set of inferences about this protein and how it differs from other proteins. But in the vat scenario, John lacks knowledge of the readout and thus, on Williamson's account, it is not available to justify such inferences. As a result, Williamson faces a dilemma. Either he says that such inferential beliefs can be justified by about how things appear to John or he says that such beliefs are not justified at all. Neither horn is palatable. Not even internalists are committed to the view that such beliefs have to be justified on the basis of internal appearances, and besides such a view lacks plausibility. Perhaps not every belief that is justified by John's internal evidence becomes part of the total evidence he can use to justify other beliefs, but some such beliefs get added to his evidence base, and simple perceptual beliefs, even when they turn out to be false, are prime candidates. The second horn of the dilemma is no less sharp. Saying that in the ordinary scenario John is justified in making

inferences from the readout whereas in the vat scenario he is not justified in making such inferences is tantamount to admitting that in the vat scenario there is not only much less that John knows, there is also much less that he can even justifiably believe. But such a result runs directly counter to the intuition that in at least one centrally important sense of justified belief, John's beliefs are equally well justified in the two scenarios.

What has most fundamentally gone wrong in Williamson's account is that he only comes half way to terms with a powerful tension that has been working its way through epistemology since the Enlightenment, a tension between the theory of justified belief and the theory of knowledge. Epistemologists have wanted there to be a necessary connection between justification and knowledge, and often take it as a working assumption that there is one, but in fact there is not an easy fit between the two. Williamson recognizes the problems inherent in using an account of justified belief to construct an account of knowledge, and so he reverses the usual order and tries to use an account of knowledge to construct an account of justified belief. But he too insists on conceptually linking two projects that are in fact distinct. The remedy is not to put knowledge first as opposed to justification first. The remedy is to put neither first.

An account of epistemically justified belief most naturally focuses on what it is appropriate for one to believe insofar as one's aim is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs, whereas an account of knowledge most naturally focuses on what relations one has to bear to one's environment in order to have knowledge of it. It is easy to take for granted that the two accounts are conceptually intertwined, given that some of the most influential figures in the history of epistemology thought that one and the same notion could capture both ideas. Descartes, for example, urged his readers to be sufficiently circumspect believers (by believing only that which is clear and distinct), but he also thought by sufficiently circumspect believers, they could also be altogether assured on acquiring knowledge.

Few epistemologists are so confident anymore. The ambitious foundationalist projects of modern epistemology have failed, and there are painful lessons to be learned from their failures, the principal one being that try as one may to marshal one's intellectual faculties, methods, and opinions to prove the reliability of these same faculties, methods, opinions, there is no non-question begging way of doing so. Even if one is ideally careful in regulating one's opinions, there can be no guarantees that one's opinions are

not seriously mistaken. But if most of one's opinions are seriously mistaken, then not even an occasional true one is a good candidate for knowledge. Consequently, even if a belief is both justified and true, there are no assurances that it comes anywhere close to satisfying the conditions of knowledge. Those who try to understand knowledge in terms of justified true belief plus some fillip to handle Gettier problems fail to acknowledge adequately this lesson. However, there is a flip side of this lesson that Williamson does not adequately acknowledge, namely, one can fail to come anywhere close to satisfying the conditions of knowledge (because, say, one's brain has been placed in a vat) and yet still have eminently justified beliefs. Being deprived of opportunities for knowledge does not thereby necessarily deprive one of opportunities for justified beliefs.

The presupposition that justified belief and knowledge are conceptually connected with one another is needlessly constraining. It has the consequence of placing the theory of knowledge and the theory of justified belief in service to one another. The post-Gettier history of epistemology illustrates how unfortunate this consequence is, and although Williamson sees himself as reacting against much of this history, he too buys into the above presupposition.

Gettier devised a pair of counterexamples to show that knowledge cannot be adequately defined as justified true belief (Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*, XXV, 1963, 121-3), and the search was then on for a fourth condition of knowledge, one that could be added to justification, truth, and belief to produce an adequate account of knowledge. Some epistemologists proposed that what is required for knowledge is nondefective justification, while others proposed that the justification must be indefeasible. However, a very different kind of response to Gettier's counterexamples was to wonder whether something less explicitly intellectual than justification, traditionally understood, is better suited for understanding knowledge. Epistemic justification is traditionally associated with being able to generate reasons in defense of one's beliefs, but in many instances of knowledge, one does not seem to be in a position to provide anything like a defense of one's beliefs.

Reliabilist accounts of knowledge emerged out of this observation. According to reliabilists, for a belief to count as knowledge, it is not necessary that one be able to defend the belief, but it is necessary that the processes that produced or sustain the belief be highly reliable. Reliability

theories of knowledge quickly led to new accounts of epistemic justification, specifically, externalist ones. Initially, reliabilism was part of a reaction against justification-driven accounts of knowledge, but an assumption drawn from the old epistemology tempted reliabilists to reconceive justification as well. The assumption is that by definition justification is that which has to be added to true belief to generate knowledge, with some fourth condition added to handle Gettier-style counterexamples. With this assumption in hand, reliabilists argued that epistemic justification must also be a matter of one's beliefs being produced and sustained by reliable cognitive processes.

Reliabilism and kindred proposals sparked an enormous literature on the relative advantages and disadvantages of externalism and internalism in epistemology. Most of this literature assumes that externalists and internalists are defending rival theories, but an alternative reading of this literature that they are not, or at least need not be, rivals at all. Rather, they are principally concerned with different issues.

Externalists are first and foremost interested in understanding the relationship that has to obtain between one's beliefs and one's environment in order for those beliefs, when true, to count as knowledge, but in carrying out this project, they see themselves as also offering an account of epistemic justification, because justification, they stipulate, is that which has to be added to true belief in order to get a serious candidate for knowledge. Internalists, on the other hand, are first and foremost interested in understanding what is required for one's beliefs to be justified, but in carrying out their project, they see themselves as also providing the materials for an adequate account of knowledge, because they too assume that justification is by definition that which has to be added to true belief to get knowledge, with some condition added to handle Gettier problems.

A reading of the literature that is charitable to both internalists and externalists is that they are pursuing distinct but equally legitimate projects, and in order to avoid confusion, these projects need to be clearly distinguished. One project, roughly expressed, is that of exploring what it is appropriate to believe insofar as one's goal is to have accurate and comprehensive beliefs. An internalist approach is well suited for this project. Another project, again roughly expressed, is that of exploring what is required for one to stand in a relation of knowledge to one's environment, and an externalist approach is better suited to this project.

Conflating these two projects has deeply unfortunate consequences for both the theory of knowledge and the theory of justified belief. For the theory of knowledge, it encourages either overly intellectual conceptions of knowledge, which overlook the fact that people cannot provide adequate intellectual defenses for much of what they know, or awkward attempts to force back into the account some duly externalized notion of justified belief, because the definition of knowledge is thought to require it. The impact on the theory of justified belief is equally regrettable. If it is stipulated that the properties that make a belief justified must also be properties that turn true belief into a good candidate for knowledge, an account of justified belief can be regarded as adequate only if it contributes to a successful account of knowledge. The theory of justified belief is thus divorced from our everyday assessments of each other's opinions, which tend to focus on whether individuals have been appropriately careful in forming their opinions rather than on whether they have satisfied the prerequisites of knowledge.

The remedy is for epistemologists to refrain from simply presupposing that the project of understanding knowledge and the project of understanding justified belief are conceptually linked. By the end of the epistemological enterprise, after accounts of justified belief and knowledge have been independently developed, interesting connections between the two may have emerged, but it ought not be assumed from the start that there is a simple, necessary tie between them. Not insisting on a tie between the two frees the theory of knowledge from overly intellectual conceptions of knowledge, thus smoothing the way for treatments that acknowledge that people are often not in a position to provide a justification for what they know, and it simultaneously creates a space for a theory of justified belief that is not cordoned off from the kinds of assessments of each other's beliefs that we need to make in our everyday lives.

This is where Williamson enters the story. He insists that knowledge cannot be understood in terms of justification plus other condition, and he is thus able to avoid the loser's game that characterizes much of recent epistemology. However, he still does link the theory of justification with the theory of knowledge. He only reverses the usual order. Knowledge is used to understand justified belief, but this too has unacceptable consequences. In scenarios involving radical deceit, such as vat scenarios, justification evaporates with knowledge.

Williamson is right to reject justification first epistemology. He is wrong to replace it with knowledge first epistemology. Neither stands in a relation of authority and preeminence to the other. The project of understanding justification and that of understanding knowledge are separate but equal enterprises.

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