

Critical Notices

Is Knowing a State of Mind?

Knowledge and its Limits. By Timothy Williamson. Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 340. ISBN 0–19–825043–6. £25.00.

In recent years, Timothy Williamson has acquired a reputation for very able defences of positions which many contemporary analytic philosophers would not, but for his promotion of them, have considered remotely defensible. This, his latest book, will further enhance that reputation. In it, he contends, amongst other things, that knowledge is a fundamental and irreducible mental state, that there is in principle nothing that we cannot fail to be in a position to know, that knowledge can explain action in a way that mere true belief cannot, that all and only knowledge is evidence, and that the normative rule governing assertion is that we should assert only what we know. In the course of defending these claims, he defends also a radical externalism in the philosophy of mind, attacks various forms of scepticism and anti-realism, and offers solutions to or dissolutions of apparent paradoxes, such as the paradox of the surprise examination and the so-called paradox of knowability (that if there are no unknowable truths, then there can be no unknown truths). The book is very clearly written but at the same time very densely and rigorously argued, which does not make for easy reading. No one who reads it carefully can fail to be deeply impressed by the thoroughness and ingenuity of the author's treatment of his chosen topics. What proportion of such readers will be persuaded by its main claims is more difficult to predict, although I surmise that many who remain unconvinced will feel hard put to say what, if anything, is wrong with Williamson's arguments. No doubt, however, the book will in due course receive a good deal of critical attention in the journals, where its arguments will be dissected and pored over in the detail that they deserve. A critical notice such as this must, however, be at once more selective and more general in its aim. My focus will be on the book's central assumption, upon which pretty much everything else in it seems to hinge, namely, that knowing is a mental state. This is not a mere assumption, since Williamson does offer considerations in its support, but these tend to be negative rather

than positive, in the sense that they are mostly designed to remove possible objections to the claim. Williamson himself asserts, indeed, that ‘Our initial presumption should be that knowing is a mental state’ (p. 22), as though this is the natural default position.

Knowledge, Belief and Truth

Williamson’s starting point is the apparently irredeemable failure of attempts to analyse knowledge in the years following Gettier’s first presentation of his notorious counterexamples to the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Williamson does not, mercifully, go over this well-trodden ground, but does take the failure of such attempts to provide strong inductive confirmation of the claim that ‘*S* knows that *p*’ cannot be analysed as, or be represented as being logically equivalent to, something of the form ‘*S* believes that *p* and it is true that *p* and . . .’, where the ellipsis is filled by one or more further necessary conditions, to complete a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for *S*’s knowing that *p*. Williamson accepts, of course, that ‘*S* knows that *p*’ entails ‘It is true that *p*’ (knowledge is ‘factive’) and accepts too, after some discussion, that ‘*S* knows that *p*’ entails ‘*S* believes that *p*’. But he contends that these entailments are not explicable only, or even best explained, in terms of an analysis of the sort that so many philosophers have sought.

Williamson acknowledges (pp. 27ff.) that it may superficially seem strange to say that knowing is a (purely) mental state, given that knowing entails believing truly, for believing truly is surely not a (purely) mental state, given that the truth of what is believed is not, in general, anything to do with the subject of belief (the person or creature that *has* the belief). He points out, however, that there is nothing structurally incoherent in the idea that a non-mental state may be ‘sandwiched between’ two mental states – in this case, the state of believing truly between the state of knowing and the state of believing – in the sense that being in that state is entailed by being in one mental state (in this case, knowing) and entails being in another (in this case, believing). He illustrates the point by an example designed to show that a non-geometrical property may in this sense be sandwiched between two geometrical properties: the property of being a triangle whose sides are indiscriminable in length to the naked human eye is sandwiched between the property of being an equilateral triangle and the property of being a triangle. However, it may be wondered how pertinent this example is, given that the reason why having the property of being an equilateral triangle entails having the property of being a triangle whose sides are indiscriminable in length to the naked human eye is the purely logical one that if lines are of the *same* length, then they cannot be discriminated *anyhow* in respect of their length (assuming that

discrimination is ‘factive’) – which has nothing to do with the powers of the human eye as such. It remains the case that knowing *essentially involves* the truth of what is known, which is something that is (in general) non-mental, and hence it does indeed seem unacceptable to maintain, as Williamson does, that knowing is a (purely) mental state. Being an equilateral triangle does not, in contrast, essentially involve having sides which are indiscriminable in length to the naked human eye. As one might otherwise put it, it is *part of the essence* of knowing that what is known is true, but it is not in like manner part of the essence of an equilateral triangle that its sides are indiscriminable in length to the naked human eye, for nothing to do with human psychology or human physiology belongs to the essence of a geometrical figure.

The ‘Purely Mental’

It will be noted that, in raising the foregoing objection, I used the distinction between a ‘purely mental’ state and a state that is not ‘purely mental’. I should emphasize that this is a distinction that Williamson himself makes. Williamson explicitly uses the expression ‘purely mental’ to characterize the state of believing and to contrast it with the state of believing truly (pp. 29–30). However – and, in effect, this is the point of my objection – he adopts what seems to be an entirely idiosyncratic and artificial way of drawing the distinction in question, so as to make knowing qualify as a ‘purely mental’ state along with believing rather than, along with believing truly, as a state that is *not* ‘purely mental’. This is what he says about the difference between the state of believing truly and the state of knowing:

If the denial that believing truly is a mental state does not immediately convince, think of it this way. Even if believing truly is a mental state in some liberal sense of the latter term, there is also a more restrictive but still reasonable sense in which believing truly is not a mental state but the combination of a mental state with a non-mental condition. The present claim is that knowing is a mental state in *every* reasonable sense of that term: that there is no more restrictive but still reasonable sense of ‘mental’ in which knowing can be factored, like believing truly, into a combination of mental states with non-mental conditions.

(p. 28)

Now, of course, Williamson is entitled, within limits, to set up his terminology however he sees fit. But even if Williamson is right in his surmise that knowing cannot be ‘factored . . . into a combination of mental states with non-mental conditions’, it doesn’t seem to me to follow that ‘knowing is a mental state in *every* reasonable sense of that term’, given that knowing

essentially involves something non-mental, namely, the truth of what is known. For believing truly likewise *essentially involves* the truth of what is believed and is on that account alone not a mental state in the most restrictive sense that is reasonable. *That* is why we may describe it as not being a ‘purely mental’ state. The issue of ‘factorability’ is entirely beside the point here, it seems to me. Certainly, believing truly *essentially involves* the truth of what is believed *because* it is a ‘combination’ of believing and the truth of what is believed. But even if knowing is no such ‘combination’, it likewise *essentially involves* the truth of what is known and this, it seems to me, suffices for us to say that it is not a mental state in the most restrictive sense that is reasonable: it is not a ‘purely mental’ state.

Knowledge as a ‘Propositional Attitude’

Williamson thinks it *prima facie* plausible to regard knowing as a being a mental state because he thinks it plausible to put it in the same category as other so-called propositional attitude states, such as believing, hoping, fearing and desiring, which are standardly regarded as paradigmatic mental states. At the same time, he seems to think it uncontentious that such states involve relations to (are ‘attitudes towards’) *propositions* (p. 21). But this in itself might lead one to query whether, indeed, such states, thus conceived, ought to be regarded as being (purely) mental states, since (on most accounts) propositions themselves are abstract objects which in general exist quite independently of the subjects of mental states.

In point of fact, I think that most contemporary philosophers of mind do not consider that believing, hoping, fearing, desiring and the rest are *literally* ‘attitudes towards propositions’ and in this sense relational states of subjects. Rather, I take it that they consider that the ‘that’-clauses of belief-, hope-, fear- or desire-ascriptions serve as ‘indices’ which enable one to compare and relate such mental states rather in the way in which numerical measures (in appropriately chosen units) enable one to compare and relate such physical states as (amounts of) mass, length and electrical charge, without thereby implying that such physical states are or involve relations to *numbers*. On this sort of view, it might be more perspicuous if we spoke of a subject’s believing, hoping, fearing or desiring ‘*p*-ly’, to bring out the (supposed) fact that the proposition that *p* only serves as an extraneous characterization of the mental state concerned, rather than being constitutively involved in the very existence and identity of that state. ‘In itself’, a proponent of this sort of view might say, a belief is not any sort of relation to a *proposition*, although it might well be a relation to a token sentence in the putative language of thought, ‘inscribed’ in the subject’s brain. The only way in which a *proposition* gets in on the act, according to this way of thinking, is via an appropriate ‘interpretation’ of (or assignment of semantic value to) such an ‘inscription’. That being so,

a belief-state is no more essentially proposition-involving than is a written inscription on a sheet of paper.

I take it that Williamson himself would not wish to be committed to such a view of beliefs and other ‘propositional attitude states’, but it seems to me that only the adherents of such a view can honestly claim that such states are purely mental in character. (They can, of course, claim this consistently with claiming that such states are also purely physical, allegedly being states of subjects’ brains.) Such a view will not, indeed, sit at all comfortably with the sort of externalism in the philosophy of mind that Williamson favours, but then it seems to me that an externalism which sees states of the subject’s environment as being constitutively involved in the subject’s beliefs, hopes, fears and desires should precisely be construed as implying that beliefs, hopes, fears and desires are *not* purely mental states, contrary to the internalist tradition.

Of seeming relevance to the foregoing discussion is Williamson’s remark that ‘non-mental concepts in the content clause of an attitude ascription do not make the concept expressed non-mental: the concept *believes that there are numbers* can be mental even if the concept *number* is not’ (p. 29). However, the issue that I have been discussing is one concerning ontology, not concepts. No one could sensibly deny that the state of having a mass of 10 kilograms is a purely physical state simply on the grounds that the concept *has a mass of 10 kilograms* involves the numerical concept *10*. However, someone who thought that the state of having a mass of 10 kilograms is or involves a relation to an abstract object, the number 10, could indeed very reasonably be said to be committed to the view that that state is not purely physical.

Folk Psychology and the Metaphysics of States

I don’t mean to suggest, by the preceding remarks, that I myself favour the sort of view that I have just attributed to most contemporary philosophers of mind. In fact, I think that an assumption which is common to that view and to Williamson’s is highly questionable, namely, that believing, hoping, fearing, desiring and the rest are genuinely *states* of subjects at all, whether or not ‘purely mental’ ones. If they are not states, then, surely, neither is knowing a state. *A fortiori*, knowing is not a mental state. To get a proper grip on the issue, we would need to have a properly worked-out metaphysics of states, which Williamson certainly does not provide. The mere fact that we can, for example, make true belief-ascriptions and that such ascriptions involve a ‘stative’ verb cuts very little ice metaphysically. The verb ‘believe’ is ‘stative’ because one cannot with grammatical propriety use it in a progressive tense to say, for example, that a subject *is believing* or *was believing* that such-and-such. Williamson, in pointing this out, remarks – as though this were metaphysically quite

innocuous – that statives ‘are used to denote states, not processes’ (p. 35). Of course, other philosophers of mind assume quite as casually that hoping and fearing are also ‘mental states’, even though the verbs ‘hope’ and ‘fear’ *can* quite properly be used in progressive tenses, as in the sentence ‘Smith was hoping all morning that it would not rain that afternoon’. Indeed, elsewhere Williamson himself quite happily speaks of hoping and fearing as being ‘mental states’ (p. 21).

One does not have to be a fan of eliminative materialism to have reasonable doubts about the extent to which one can read substantive metaphysical theses into the language of folk psychology. Allegiance to the truth-maker principle certainly entitles us to suppose that if a belief-ascription is true, then it is true in virtue of something to do with the subject of the ascription (the believer). But that something need not be the believer’s possession of an appropriate ‘belief-state’. Similarly, to deny that colour-properties exist does not commit one to denying that true colour-ascriptions may be made, for the truth-maker principle does not require us to suppose that what makes a true colour-ascription true is the possession by the object in question of an appropriate colour-property. It may plausibly be contended, for instance, that quite different physical properties make the same sort of colour-ascription true in various different cases: that what makes it true, say, that a certain star ‘is red’ is quite different, physically, from what makes it true that a certain flower ‘is red’. The reification of beliefs and other ‘propositional attitude states’ bears all the hallmarks of a naïve metaphysics which attempts to read off the ontological structure of the world from the grammatical structure of the language we commonly use to talk about it. However, that language did not evolve to serve the ends of ontology but only to facilitate everyday communication and the coordination of human actions. Serious ontology must proceed in other ways. This is not the place for me to suggest what those ways should be, but neither will the reader of Williamson’s book find much to the purpose there.

Epistemology and the Philosophy of Mind

It is true enough that the philosophical industry devoted to finding a Gettier-proof analysis of knowledge in terms of true belief plus some additional magic factor *X* has all the signs of a degenerating research programme. But rather than taking the lesson to be, as Williamson does, that knowledge is a fundamental and irreducible mental state, I am inclined to take it to be that there is literally no such thing as knowledge. Strictly speaking, then, epistemology or the ‘theory of knowledge’, as it is traditionally conceived, is a subject without a subject-matter. The point is not meant to be a sceptical one, for the typical sceptic, quite as much as the anti-sceptical epistemologist, assumes that if anyone knows anything, then

states of knowing exist (even if such states are regarded as hybrids rather than – as Williamson would have it – purely mental states). I have no difficulty in supposing that knowledge-ascriptions are sometimes true: that it can sometimes literally be true to say something of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’. What I doubt is whether what makes such a thing true is *S*’s possession of a ‘knowledge-state’. And, indeed, it is hard to suppose that the function of everyday knowledge-ascriptions is to assign such putative states to subjects. Why, in general, do we make assertions of this form? Typically, we do so not so much with a view to characterizing the ‘state of mind’ of the subject in question (the ‘knower’), but more with a view to endorsing or recommending the claim that *p* and, by implication, imposing some sort of obligation upon the subject (for example, the obligation not to assert that not *p*). This is particularly manifest in the first-person case. When I assert ‘I know that *p*’, I don’t standardly mean to convey to my interlocutor a piece of psycho-autobiography. That is why the question ‘How do you know that you know that *p*?’ is one that only a philosopher could ask – and then only a philosopher weighed down by a particular burden of philosophical baggage. Descartes-bashing is a lamentable exercise that is still overindulged in by philosophers, but perhaps Descartes does have a lot to answer for in persuading philosophers to think of knowledge in terms of the possession by individual subjects of mental states of ‘knowing’. For all the ways in which Williamson, in common with other contemporary ‘externalists’, departs from the Cartesian tradition, he shares with that tradition what is, perhaps, its most insidious legacy – the supposition that, as Williamson himself puts it, ‘We can see epistemology as a branch of the philosophy of mind’ (p. 41).

Perhaps these remarks will be criticized for overlooking what might be thought to be Williamson’s most powerful argument for regarding knowing as a mental state, namely, that knowledge can causally explain action in a way that mere true belief cannot. The explanatory role of mental states, it may be said, is what chiefly secures them a place in a serious ontology of mind – and by this standard, if Williamson is right, states of knowing are secured such a place in addition to states of believing. He urges, for instance, that a burglar’s lengthy and potentially risky ransacking of a house is more strongly explained by the burglar’s *knowing* that there was a diamond in the house than by his merely *believing*, or even believing truly, that there was one there (p. 62). Perhaps, in some sense, that is so, but it is a big step to take from examples like this to the conclusion that knowledge is (as Williamson has it) a ‘causally efficacious’ state of human subjects. For it is not even uncontentious that the sort of explanation involved in such a case is a genuinely ‘causal’ one.