

## Notes on Chapter 2 of *Knowledge and its Limits*

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We will focus mainly on the argument “from internalism to the denial that knowing is a mental state” presented in section 2.3. The argument runs as follows (my re-ordering). First, W’s internalist accepts:

- (3) For all cases  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , if  $\alpha$  is internally like  $\beta$ , then one is in exactly the same mental state in  $\alpha$  as in  $\beta$ .

Williamson takes this to be a fundamental tenet of internalism. Next, for *reductio*, W’s internalist supposes:

- (2) For all propositions  $p$  and cases  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , if one is in exactly the same mental state in  $\alpha$  as in  $\beta$ , then in  $\alpha$  one knows  $p$  if and only if in  $\beta$  one knows  $p$ .

That is, they assume for *reductio* that knowing  $p$  supervenes on one’s (total) mental state. Then, from (2) and (3) we may infer that knowing supervenes on one’s internal state (supervenience is transitive):

- (4) For all  $p$ ,  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , if  $\alpha$  is internally like  $\beta$ , then in  $\alpha$  one knows  $p$  if and only if in  $\beta$  one knows  $p$ .

And, (4) implies that knowing  $p$  is a narrow condition, which nobody accepts. Thus, since W’s internalist accepts (3), they must reject (2), and anything stronger, including the claim that knowing is a mental state:

- (1) For all  $p$ , there is a mental state  $S$  such that in every  $\alpha$ , one is in  $S$  if and only if one knows  $p$ .

After rejecting that knowledge is a mental state, W’s internalists then “seek to factorize it into mental and non-mental components”. The obvious candidate for the mental component is believing (or rationally/truly believing, *etc.*). Here, Williamson cites Stich (and Kim) as endorsing the slogan that ‘what knowledge adds to belief is psychologically irrelevant’. Interestingly, Williamson renders this slogan as follows:

- (5) For all  $p$ ,  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  one believes  $p$  then in some  $\beta$  one is in the same mental state as in  $\alpha$  and one knows  $p$ .

Note that this rendition of the slogan has Stich (and Kim) making a primarily *metaphysical* claim, as opposed to a *methodological* claim about psychological explanation, prediction (or practice). We think that’s unfair to Stich who also thinks that what *content* adds to “syntax in the head” is psychologically irrelevant *because* it is broad. If anything, what Stich and Williamson disagree about here is the scope and domain of psychological explanation and prediction. To say that they disagree on (5) or any other metaphysical claim is misleading. Kim, on the other hand, is more likely to endorse (5) as a rendition of the slogan. But, Kim has some rather strong (realist) metaphysical views about psychological kinds and their status and role in psychological theory. Be that as it may, Williamson goes on to explain that (5) is false for various reasons. This is where we start to see some *substantive views* of Williamson about situations involving knowledge vs mere belief:

- Suppose that in case  $\alpha$  one falsely believes that someone is alert solely on the basis of one’s false first-person present-tense belief that one is alert. If in case  $\beta$  one is in exactly the same mental state as in  $\alpha$ , then in  $\beta$  one also believes that someone is alert solely on the basis of one’s first-person present tense belief that one is alert; since one’s level of alertness is itself a feature of one’s mental state, then in  $\beta$  one is not alert, so one’s belief that one is alert is false; since that false belief is the only basis for one’s belief that someone is alert, one does not know that someone is alert.
- It is possible falsely to believe that  $79 + 89 = 158$ ; it is impossible to know that  $79 + 89 = 158$ .

One might try to change “believes” to “truly believes”, yielding:

- (6) For all  $p$ ,  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  one truly believes  $p$  then in some  $\beta$  one is in the same mental state as in  $\alpha$  and one knows  $p$ .

Williamson argues that this is *still* false:

- Someone may believe truly that garlic is healthy to eat for reasons so confused and irrational as to be incompatible with knowing that garlic is healthy to eat; since his confusion and irrationality is an aspect of his mental state, no one could be in exactly the same mental state and know that garlic is healthy to eat.

Moreover, W urges that it doesn’t matter anyway, since “truly believes” is not *internal* in the desired sense. So, one might try “rationally believes” (or “justifiably believes”) instead (this is what Fricker does), yielding:

- (7) For all  $p$ ,  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  one rationally believes  $p$  (or has a justified belief that  $p$ ) then in some  $\beta$  one is in the same mental state as in  $\alpha$  and one knows  $p$ .

Williamson concedes that (7) may avoid his counterexamples to (5), but he complains that it is not congenial to content externalism [*i.e.*, that (7) + content externalism makes the denial of (1)/(2) ill-motivated].

- Suppose that it looks and sounds to me as though I see and hear a barking dog; I believe that a dog is barking on the basis of the argument 'That dog is barking; therefore, a dog is barking'. Unfortunately, I am the victim of an illusion, my demonstrative fails to refer, my premise sentence thereby fails to express a proposition, and my lack of a corresponding singular belief is a feature of my mental state, according to the content externalist. If I rationally believe that a dog is barking, then by (7) someone could be in exactly the same mental state as I actually am and know that a dog is barking. But that person, too, would lack a singular belief to serve as the premise of the inference, and would therefore not know that a dog is barking.

Williamson has a deeper worry about (7). He worries that we don't really have a grasp of the notion of rational belief that is not parasitic on our grasp of knowledge. Here, he appeals to lottery cases:

- Consider a case  $\alpha$  in which one believes that ticket #666 will not win the lottery solely on the basis that its probability of winning is only one in a million. In any case  $\beta$  in which one is in the same mental state as in  $\alpha$  one believes that ticket #666 will not win the lottery only on the same probabilistic grounds; thus in  $\beta$  one does not know that ticket #666 will not win the lottery. If one had known that the ticket would not win, one would not have bought it. Consequently, by (7), in  $\alpha$  one does not rationally believe that the ticket will not win the lottery. But in  $\alpha$  one's belief is not irrational in any obvious sense independent of considerations of knowledge. It is based on relevant reasons; the problem is just that they are not of a kind that would permit the belief to constitute knowledge.

Sherri raises an interesting point about (7). She points out that no reasonable epistemologist would accept (7) because of the existence of Gettier-style counterexamples to it. Here's an example Sherri came up with:

- You have a justified belief that one of your officemates, Contreras, owns a Ford. You were with him when he bought it and saw him sign the papers. He loved the car and you saw him driving it yesterday. You infer from your justified belief that someone in the office owns a Ford, and your resulting belief is surely justified. Unbeknownst to you, though, Contreras is a huge soccer fan and for his vacation next week he's going to Korea to watch the U.S. vs. Mexico match. He feels ashamed of this obsession, and that he would pay so much to go, so he never told anyone. In order to go, though, he has to sell his car; that's how expensive it is. He's had the sale arranged all week and he handed over the car last night when he was done using it for the week. You might think that this means your justified belief is false. This can certainly happen but it doesn't in this case. For in the meantime your other officemate, Padilla, has bought a Ford. You don't even know he bought a car, so you have no justified belief that he owns a Ford. This is because you and Padilla aren't particularly friends. Now, your belief that someone in the office owns a Ford is true, and it's justified (since your belief about Contreras is justified and (presumably) deduction preserves justification, but surely it isn't knowledge. Standard diagnosis: the reason the belief "Someone in the office owns a Ford" is true is completely different from the reason you *believe* it to be true. The first is because of what you are justified in believing about Contreras, the second because of what is true of Padilla.

It should not be entirely obvious why this is a counterexample to (7). But, Sherri will explain this, and she will also do a riff on contemporary epistemology and how it dovetails with Williamson's discussion here.

Final point: we should distinguish several varieties of "internalism" that may be floating around here.

- Metaphysical internalism about content. [We take it most people reject this nowadays. Right?]
- Metaphysical internalism about mental states. [*i.e.*, (3) — W's internalist's central tenet. We don't have a sense of how many people accept W's (3). Does anyone know more about the state of play on this?]
- Epistemological internalism about rational belief/justification/knowledge. [As we see it, this is usually motivated by worries about the nature of one's *access* to one's reasons/evidence. This isn't so unpopular. People like Feldman, Conee, and Fumerton are vigorously defending it. More on this later.]
- Methodological internalism concerning psychology. [As we see it, this is usually motivated by 'locality' assumptions about causation/explanation, and intuitions about the *empirical adequacy* of "internal" (descriptive) models of human behavior. It is the former that W talks most about when he applies his view to explaining behavior. Here, Yablo's paper "Causal Relevance" is a *must read* — see website. This is also not such an unpopular view. Yablo's paper should give you some sense as to why. There are some rather subtle views (more subtle than Stich's!) that are compatible with *this* "internalism".]