

Why think that we *can* analyze knowledge in terms of some set of constituents?

An argument:

Knowledge entails belief; it entails that the belief is true; and it entails that it is justified. It is then tempting to think of these as necessary but insufficient conditions. And it is then tempting to go on a hunt for something we can add to get a sufficient set.

But consider the following counterexamples:

- “x is red” entails “x is colored” but not vice versa. But we cannot find a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for: x is red if and only if (x is colored & ...)
- “x is a parent of y” entails “x is an ancestor of y” but not vice versa. But we cannot find a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for: x is a parent of y if and only if (x is an ancestor of y & ...)

Similarly: just because belief and justification is necessary for knowledge, it doesn't follow that we can find a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for: x knows that p if and only if (x believes that p & x is justified & ...)

Williamson gives us two main arguments in support of his claim that knowledge is unanalyzable:

1. Pessimistic Induction: No one has been able to come up with a successful analysis. And, by god, they have tried.
2. Metaphysical Argument: Knowledge is a mental state. This means that for some mental state S, being in S is necessary and sufficient for knowing p. But believing truly is not a mental state; it's a mental state together with a non-mental condition. So, knowledge cannot be identical to true belief (+ other conditions).

### Knowledge as a Factive Mental State

The basic idea:

A propositional attitude is factive if and only if, necessarily, one has it only to truths. Examples include the attitudes of seeing, knowing, and remembering. Not all factive attitudes constitute states; forgetting is a process. Call those attitudes which do constitute states stative. The proposal is that knowing is the most general factive stative attitude, that which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all. (KAIL, p. 34)

There are many ways of being colored: something can be red, green, yellow.

Similarly, there are many ways of knowing: one can see that p, remember that p, recall that p, hear that p, perceive that p,... Knowledge is, according to Williamson, the *most general factive mental state*.

Linguistic Evidence:

- If  $\Phi$  is an FMSO, from ‘S  $\Phi$ s that A’ one may infer ‘A’.
- ‘Know’ is an FMSO.
- If  $\Phi$  is an FMSO, from ‘S  $\Phi$ s that A’ one may infer ‘S knows that A’.

What about belief?

If believing p is, roughly, treating p as if one knew p, then knowing is in that sense central to believing. Knowledge sets the standard of appropriateness for belief. That does not imply that all cases of knowing are paradigmatic cases of believing, for one might know p while in a sense treating p as if one did not know p—that is, while treating p in ways untypical of those in which subjects treat what they know. Nevertheless, as a crude generalization, the

further one is from knowing p, the less appropriate it is to believe p. Knowing is in that sense the best kind of believing. Mere believing is a kind of botched knowing. In short, belief aims at knowledge (not just truth). (KAIL, p. 47)

### **The Challenge from Internalism**

Internalists hold that our mental states are determined by our internal physical states: the mind is “in the head”.

Consider Jerry Fodor:

Since, on that assumption [that knowledge is factive], knowledge is involved with truth, and since truth is a semantic notion, it's going to follow that there can't be a psychology of *knowledge* (even if it is consonant with the formality condition to hope for a psychology of *belief*) (1981, p. 228)

Note that internalists need not be committed to us being able to give an analysis of the concept of knowledge in terms of belief and other conditions. Rather, they are committed to a metaphysical claim about knowledge: namely, that it reduces to belief plus external conditions.

*Response:* We are already comfortable with externalism about content. But then, if we are happy that the environment can play a role in determining which content someone's mental states have, why not allow that it can play a role in determining the mental states themselves.

### **The Challenge from Action Explanation**

Mental states are causally efficacious. But they are causally efficacious, only if narrow. For example: [knowledge] is best regarded not as a psychological state, but as a complex consisting of a psychological state (belief) plus certain external factors – not because its status as knowledge is causally irrelevant in action explanation, but because it does not have to be cited, as such, in the psychological explanation of action at all'.

*Response:* There are reasons for thinking that knowledge is central to action explanation. In particular, knowledge is crucial for attributions of intentional action.

Gibbons argues:

Talk of intentional action presupposes a certain degree of control on the part of the agent. Control, like perception, requires the right kind of connection between the agent and the facts. An essential ingredient in this kind of connection is knowledge. (p. 591)

Consider: a doctor wants to cure a patient of their condition and prescribes medicine X, in the belief that medicine X will help. As it happens, medicine X does help the patient but the doctor has misdiagnosed the disease. Medicine X contains an additive that is effective against the patient's actual condition.

The doctor wanted to cure the patient and she had a true belief about how to do this. Nevertheless, she did not intentionally cure the patient. She got lucky.

Another example: it's impossible to intentionally win the lottery.

So, if we think that there's a genuine distinction between intentional and unintentional action, then knowledge plays an important role in distinguishing between them.

Most of us think that the distinction between intentional and unintentional action is a real distinction in nature. If one person does something on purpose and another does the same

thing but just gets lucky or does it by accident, we think it is more likely that the first person will do that sort of thing again in the future. “Luck” and “accident” are, almost by definition, non-projectable. To call it lucky or accidental is to say that you should not count on it. (p. 597)

### **Empirical Work**

In psychology, knowledge is routinely treated as a mental state. And psychologists mean by knowledge what philosophers mean too (roughly): a non-accidentally true belief.

Children acquire the word “know” before the word “belief” (or “think”); this is a finding that is cross-culturally stable.

There is growing empirical evidence that suggests that we should ascribe certain epistemic mental states, e.g. knowing where the food is, to non-human primates. Non-human primates however consistently fail false-belief tests.

Jennifer Nagel argues:

One way of appreciating the greater simplicity of knowledge attribution is to follow the earlier line according to which knowledge is a state that essentially involves matching how things are, where belief is essentially a state that may or may not match reality. The additional degree of freedom in belief attribution poses an additional computational burden, which matters because a significant challenge in explaining mature human mindreading is explaining how it is computationally possible, given the open-ended character of the information that might be task-relevant.

### **Readings:**

Fodor, Jerry A. (1981). *Representations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science*. MIT Press.

Gibbons, John (2001). Knowledge in action. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (3): 579-600.

Nagel, Jennifer (2013). Knowledge as a Mental State. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 4:275-310.

Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.