

## **Factivity Without Safety**

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I summarize Timothy Williamson's theory of knowledge, construct some counterexamples to it, and try to diagnose the problem in virtue of which those counterexamples arise. Then I consider possible responses. It turns out that only one of those responses is tenable, and that that response renders Williamson's theory a continuous piece of, rather than a radical paradigmatic break from, recent mainstream work in the theory of knowledge.

### **I. Williamson's New Paradigm**

Williamson claims that knowledge is the most general factive stative attitude – the attitude that one has whenever one has *any* factive stative attitude (39).<sup>1</sup> That is:

S knows that P iff there is some factive stative attitude A such that S bears A to P.

Attitudes are mental states that cognizers bear towards propositions; they include believing, guessing, and doubting. An attitude A is factive just in case, for any person S and proposition P, S bears A to P only if P is true. An attitude A is stative just in case having A constitutes a state. States are to be contrasted with processes; states obtain at given times whereas processes unfold over time.

Many factive states are not attitudes; true belief is such a state. Why does true belief fail to count as an attitude? Williamson's answer is that attitudes are mental states, whereas true belief is a conjunction of a mental state (belief) with a nonmental condition (truth).

But isn't knowledge also a conjunction of one or more mental states with one or more nonmental conditions? And doesn't this fact belie the foregoing theory of knowledge? Here Williamson's answer is an emphatic *no*. Knowledge is *just* a mental state: there is a mental state (namely, the most general factive stative attitude) that is both necessary and sufficient for knowledge.

If all of this is right, then it puts the kibosh on a few small libraries' worth of mainstream theory of knowledge whilst ushering in a radical new epistemological paradigm. This new paradigm seems very powerful, not least because it appears to dissolve whatever problems have driven the seemingly interminable sequence of post-Gettier accounts of knowledge.

I'm going to argue that this new paradigm isn't as powerful as it seems. It is subject to counterexamples, and the only tenable fix for those counterexamples constitutes a return to the post-Gettier research program from which the new paradigm is supposed to extricate us.

## **II. Counterexamples**

The strategy is to identify several factive stative attitudes and then construct cases in which they don't amount to knowledge. The attitudes are seeing, being aware, realizing, and being

frustrated. Williamson invokes four tests for whether something is a factive stative attitude (35-36). An attitude A passes his

factivity test just if

statements of the form “S A’s that P” entail the proposition that P,

unanalyzability test just if

the concept A is not composed of other concepts,

attitude-ascription test just if

the word “A” takes animates as subjects and that-clauses as objects,

and progressive rejection test just if

the word “A” rejects the progressive tense, as in

\*Jane is knowing that there are infinitely many primes,

but not

Jane is learning that there are infinitely many primes.

Each of these attitudes passes each of these tests. If a person sees that P, or realizes that P, or is aware that P, then P is true. The same holds for frustration, for “It hasn’t snowed yet, but John is frustrated that it has snowed” is a contradiction. Conceptual analyses of *seeing*, *realizing*, *awareness*, and *frustration* do not seem to be forthcoming. In fact, conceptual unanalyzability is normal, and it should be assumed to hold until we are given good reasons to think otherwise. Our four attitudes can easily be seen to pass the attitude ascription test as well. To see that they pass the progressive rejection test, consider the following sentences:

\*Mark is seeing that motorcycles are dangerous.

\*Kate is being aware that cats and dogs don’t get along.

\*Laura is realizing that something has gone awry.

\*Josh is being frustrated that the Broncos lost.

Seeing, being aware, realizing, and being frustrated thus pass all of Williamson's tests for being factive stative attitudes. None of them, however, guarantee knowledge.

**Case 1:** Illusion dodgers. Dan's room has five tables. One is red and illuminated by white light; the others are white and illuminated by red light. Dan often marvels at the tables' colors, but he is ignorant of the lighting tricks, so his marveling usually goes wrong. Right now he is marveling at the redness of the red table. He sees that there is a red table in front of him, but he doesn't know it.

**Case 2:** Gossip Victims. An unreliable gossip says that there is a scandal. Vince believes him. Later someone asks Vince if he is aware of the scandal. He says that he is, and in so doing he speaks the truth. He is aware that there is a scandal, but he doesn't know it.

**Case 3:** Hypochondriacs. Over and over again, Hank falsely takes himself to have the flu. He even has aches, fevers, and other relevant symptoms; still he is never infected with the influenza virus. Then one day he gets infected. As per usual, he gets the relevant symptoms and takes himself to have the flu. He realizes that he's got the flu, but he doesn't know it.

**Case 4:** Perfectionists. Sam is frustrated that his paper is bad. He always thinks that his papers are bad, normally quite falsely. Unbeknownst to him, however, he managed this time to read

only an abridged version of the work he was criticizing. The unabridged version answers his criticisms. This time his paper *is* bad - but he doesn't know it.

Similar cases can be constructed for many other factive stative attitudes including recognizing, intuiting, noting, regretting, and resenting.

### **III. Diagnosis and Dialectic**

Why is Williamson's theory subject to these counterexamples? The answer seems to be that knowledge is safe but factivity isn't.

There are many formulations of the safety condition. My favorite is this: S knows that P only if S couldn't easily have falsely believed that P. The illusion dodger, the gossip victim, the hypochondriac, and the perfectionist all *could* easily have falsely held their beliefs, despite their factive stative attitudes. Factivity doesn't bring them safety, and that is why they don't know.

Several responses could be made on Williamson's behalf.

**Response 1:** Say that the people know.

This won't work. For, despite the fact that no safety condition is included in his factive stative attitude account of knowledge, Williamson advocates the view that knowledge requires safety (100, 147).

Could he drop the safety condition? Not easily. The safety condition is essential to the anti-luminosity argument that he uses as a fulcrum for lifting his position above its internalist rivals (93-110). It also underwrites his resolutions of a number of puzzles including the surprise exam paradox (135-142). And it shows up again in his arguments that the concept *knows* features in our best psychological explanations (60-64). Without the safety condition, then, Williamson's new paradigm loses quite a bit of its theoretical capital.

Could he argue that the cases actually do feature safety? Perhaps. In his most careful moments, he invokes a safety condition that is more complicated than the one above, to wit: if S knows that P on the basis of B, then S could not easily have falsely believed that P on the basis of B (149).<sup>2</sup> The basing relation here is taken to hold between methods and beliefs, so that beliefs are based on the methods via which they are held. The methods are individuated externally and finely, so that the facts about which method one uses depend on fairly specific facts about one's environment that one may not be in a position to know (128, 155-156). For example, *seeing a text* and *having a text-percept* are different methods (179). Thus Williamson would say that your belief that there is a text in front of you is based on a different method than is your biv-twin's belief that there is a text in front of her, and that this is so despite the fact that she is not in a position to know it (182-183).

This fine-grained externalist methodism about basing nicely blocks skeptical arguments that assume that we base our beliefs on the same methods as do our biv-twins. And it reaches far beyond brains and vats. *Seeing a table's redness* and *having a red-table-percept* turn out to be

different methods. So illusion dodgers have safe beliefs after all! Williamson's basis-relative safety condition could thus be used to underwrite the knowledge-attributing response to our cases; if the beliefs in those cases are safe, why *shouldn't* they amount to knowledge?

The resulting position, according to which illusion dodgers have both safety and knowledge, isn't tenable. Suppose that the room has, not 4, but 400 redly illuminated white tables to its one whitely illuminated red table. Surely the illusion dodger who marvels at *this* table's redness does not know that there is a red table in front of him. But the basis-relativist defense of safety and knowledge in the regular illusion dodger case commits us to the view that he does.

To summarize: the knowledge-attributing response requires either that we drop the safety condition, in which case the new paradigm loses substantial theoretical capital, or that we say that the cases feature safety, in which case we end up attributing knowledge in extreme cases where it does not really apply. Neither outcome is tenable, so we need a new response

**Response 2:** Deny that the people see, realize, are aware, and are frustrated. Bivs don't see that they have hands, so why should illusion dodgers see that there are red tables in front of them?

Well, the cases are different. When it is applied to the illusion dodger case, the denial of factive stative attitudes commits us to the following two views: (a) if in a normal room I see a red table in front of me, I thereby see that there is a red table in front of me, but (b) if in the illusion room I see a red table in front of me, I don't thereby see that there is a red table in front of me. Since the biv doesn't even see *a* hand, it is not so strange to say that he doesn't see *that* there is a hand.

But the illusion dodger does see a red table in front of him, and he believes that there is a red table in front of him *on that basis*. Denials of seeing-that in this sort of case are quite different from denials of seeing-that to bivs, and they are more strained.

Suppose we adopt the attitude-denying response anyway. We will still harbor our pretheoretic intuitions about seeing-that. Thus we will be unable to determine whether a person knows-that by first determining whether she sees-that: we will have to go the other way around instead. In this sense, our attitude-denying version of Williamson's theory will make factive-stative-attitude attributions epistemically dependent on knowledge attributions.

This dependence robs Williamson's theory of its net progress towards illuminating the nature of knowledge. For, given the dependence, it turns out that he's purchased an account of the nature of knowledge at the price of only being able to apply that account by first applying the pretheoretic concept *knows*. To see what is wrong with this sort of transaction, consider the claim that for any person and any object, that person morally deserves that object if and only if she is entitled to it. Conjoin that claim with the additional (and unintuitive) claim that people are not entitled to random gifts that they receive from strangers. The resulting conjunction amounts to an entitlement theory of desert on which entitlement attributions are epistemically dependent on desert attributions. Surely this theory brings us no closer to understanding desert than we were before it was conjectured. Similarly with the attitude-denying version of Williamson's theory of knowledge.

It might be tempting to try to defeat this analogy by invoking the “knowledge first” theme. Williamson often takes knowledge first and uses it to elucidate other phenomena. For instance, he elucidates justification with the view that one’s beliefs are justified if and only if they are rendered probable by one’s knowledge (185-190), and he elucidates the phenomenon of mere belief by viewing it as a kind of botched knowing (41-48). Could the epistemic dependence of factive-stative-attitude attributions on knowledge attributions be defended on grounds that it amounts to more of the same?

No, because the “knowledge first” theme enrolls knowledge in the *elucidation* of other phenomena. No phenomenon is elucidated by the epistemic dependence in question, just like no phenomenon is elucidated by our epistemic dependence of entitlement attributions on desert attributions.

To recapitulate. The attitude-denying response requires that we deny seeing-that to people who believe-that on the basis of seeing-a. These denials are unintuitive. Moreover, they rob Williamson’s factive stative attitude theory of net progress in illuminating the nature of knowledge. Nor can this problem be solved by appealing to “knowledge first”. Again we need a new response.

**Response 3:** Add the safety condition to the account of knowledge, yielding

S knows that P iff there is some factive stative attitude A such that S safely bears A to P.

This new account allows that our cases feature genuine seeing, realizing, being aware, and being frustrated, while at the same time denying that the people in those cases know. But it is antithetical to Williamson's program. It drops the view that knowledge is a mental state, replacing it with the view that knowledge is a conjunction of a mental state with the nonmental safety condition. Furthermore, the safety condition has its historical roots firmly planted in the epistemology literature of the last 40 years. And there are arguments – arguments in need of answers - that shed doubt on the condition's necessity for knowledge. We're right back in the briar patch.<sup>3</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Williamson's factive stative attitude theory of knowledge is subject to counterexamples. Of the three ways out of those counterexamples, two are untenable and the third makes the account a continuous part of recent mainstream epistemology. Whichever route we take, Williamson's new paradigm isn't as powerful as it seems.<sup>4</sup>

#### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> References in the above format are to Williamson (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Compare Nozick (1980: 179-183) and Sosa (2004: 322).

<sup>3</sup> Challenges to safety include Comesaña (forthcoming) and Neta and Rohrbaugh (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Alvin Goldman, John Hawthorne, Peter Klein, Karson Kovakovich, Christian Lee, and Timothy Williamson for helpful comments on ancestors of this paper.