Lecture 6 Rejecting Analyses II: Knowledge First

1. Three Arguments for Unanalysability

Timothy Williamson (2000) argues that knowledge is unanalysable. Cassam (2009) helpfully labels these as follows:

Distinct Concepts Argument

Inductive Argument

False Expectations Argument

2. False Expectations Argument

According to Williamson, the enterprise of traditional epistemology rests on a false expectation that knowledge is analysable into a conjunction of necessary conditions.

We begin with the recognition that knowledge entails true belief, but not vice versa. Then, if truth and belief are necessary but insufficient component parts of knowledge, we reason, there must be some X such that X is also necessary for knowledge, and true belief + X are sufficient for knowledge.

Although being coloured is a necessary but insufficient condition for being red, we cannot state a necessary and sufficient condition for being red by conjoining being coloured with other properties specified without reference to red. Neither the equation 'Red = coloured + X' nor the equation 'Knowledge = true belief + X' need have a non-circular solution. (Williamson 2000: 3)

Q. Does it follow from this that knowledge is *not* analysable?

Q. Is the concept of knowledge sufficiently like the concept of red?

3. Inductive Argument

A great many attempts to analyse knowledge in terms of true belief and some further condition have failed. So there is reason to think knowledge is not analysable in this way.

Q. Has it been long enough for such an induction?

4. Distinct Concepts Argument

Here is the argument, as laid out by Cassam (2009: 14).

- (a) Every standard analysis of the concept *knows* equates it with some conjunctive concept *C* which has the concept *true* as a nonredundant component.
- (b) The concept *true* is not a mental concept.
- (c) Any concept with a non-redundant non-mental component is not a mental concept.
- (d) All Cs with which the concept *knows* is equated in standard analyses are not mental concepts.
- (e) *knows* is a mental concept.
- (f) A mental concept cannot be the very same concept as a non-mental concept.
- (g) So, *knows* is not any of the Cs.
- (h) All standard analyses which give us *C*s are false.

Cassam then presents an argument of the same form in order to demonstrate its invalidity.

...let us say that a marital status concept is one that, when applied to an individual, says something about that individual's marital status. So, for example, married, single, bachelor, separated, and divorced all count as marital status concepts. Furthermore, where C is the conjunction of the concepts C_1, \ldots, C_n , let us stipulate that C is a marital status concept if and

only if each C_i is a marital status concept. On this account, unmarried man is not a marital status concept, since man is not a marital status concept. But bachelor is a marital status concept. So bachelor and unmarried man cannot be the same concept. (2009: 14)

However, as Cassam himself points out, this isn't strictly analogous to Williamson's argument about knowledge. The reason is that Williamson takes *knows* to be a *purely mental concept*. *Bachelor*, on the other hand, isn't a *purely* marital concept, since it tells us something about gender as well.

In light of this, we should amend (d) and (e) above to read as follows:

- (d*) All *C*s with which the concept *knows* are equated are not *pure* mental concepts.
- (e*) *knows* is a pure mental concept.

- Q. What reason do we have for accepting (e^*) ?
- Q. Even if we accept that knowledge is a mental state, does (e*) follow?

5. Factive Mental States

Williamson's account of knowledge begins with the claim that knowledge is "a state of mind" (2000: 21). By this he means that "for some mental state S, being is S is necessary and sufficient for knowing p" (21).

He considers some arguments against considering knowledge to be a mental state.

Transparency

Argument: "For every mental state S, whenever one is suitably alert and conceptually sophisticated, one is in a position to know whether one is in S'' (24). But we are not always in a position to know whether we know. So knowledge is not a mental state.

Williamson rejects the first premise. He argues that we are very often unaware of our own mental states. For instance, I might think that I don't have a particular preference between outcomes A and B. But then when B occurs, I feel disappointment; this reveals that I had hoped for A.

Defeasibility

Argument: Beliefs about whether we're in a particular mental state are not defeasible by new information. But, beliefs about whether we know that p are defeasible by new information. So knowledge is not a mental state.

Williamson again rejects the first premise. There are many other beliefs about mental states that are defeasible. For instance "one's belief about whether one is alert or thinking clearly about a problem is defeasible by new information, for example about what drugs had been slipped into one's drink" (26).

Williamson then defines what it takes for any propositional attitude to be *factive*:

"A proposition attitude is factive if and only if, necessarily, one has it only to truths" (34).

Finally, he characterises knowledge as "the most general factive stative attitude" (34). He compares this to the property of being coloured. The latter is the property that anything has if it has any colour at all. Similarly, knowledge is the factive stative attitude that one has if one has any factive stative attitude toward a proposition at all. Other kinds of factive stative attitudes would include: seeing that p, remembering that p.

Williamson calls terms like 'seeing' and 'remembering' *Factive Mental State Operators* (FMSOs). FMSOs obey the following rules (39):

- 1. If Φ is an FMSO, from `S Φ s that A' one may infer `A'.
- 2. 'Know' is an FMSO.
- 3. If Φ is an FMSO, from `S Φ s that A' on may infer `S knows that A'.

6. Issues in Traditional Epistemology

Williamson takes it that his account can still address important issues from traditional epistemology.

Value

He argues that we can understand the value of knowledge in terms of the value of truth. (He acknowledges that more must be said here about the "nature and significance" of the "matching between mind and world" (40) central to factive mental states.)

Justification and Reliability

Williamson argues that any adequate account of knowledge should be able to say something about how justification and reliability relate to knowledge. Though doing so does not require an analysis of one in terms of the other. He maintains that his account can explain the relationship between knowledge and justification/reliability by appealing to the "metaphysics of states" (41).

Belief

Williamson accepts the entailment from 'S knows that p' to 'S believes that p'. But he does not do so on the basis of taking belief to be conceptually prior to knowledge (as traditional epistemologists do). Instead, he argues the opposite is true. "Mere believing is a kind of botched knowing" (47). A bit more precisely, he maintains that "knowledge is the evidential standard for the justification of belief" (48).