

# KK AND THE KNOWLEDGE NORM OF ACTION

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ABSTRACT: This piece examines the purported explanatory and normative role of knowledge in Timothy Williamson's account of intentional action and suggests that it is in tension with his argument against the luminosity of knowledge. Only iterable knowledge can serve as the norm for action capable of explaining both why people with knowledge act differently than those with mere beliefs and why only those who act on the basis of knowledge-desire pairs are responsible actors.

KEYWORDS: knowledge-first, Timothy Williamson, knowledge norm of action, KK

Timothy Williamson's knowledge-first epistemology claims that knowledge is unanalyzable and plays a fundamental role as the norm for assertion and action.<sup>1</sup> For Williamson, knowledge is primitive. All prior attempts to factorize knowledge failed.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that they must fail.<sup>3</sup> Instead, knowledge is the most general mental state operating.<sup>4</sup> Other purportedly epistemic mental states can and should be analyzed in terms of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

This piece examines the purported explanatory and normative role of knowledge in Williamson's account of intentional action and suggests that it is in tension with his argument against the luminosity of knowledge. Only iterable knowledge can serve as the norm for action capable of explaining both why people with knowledge act differently than those with mere beliefs and why only those who act on the basis of knowledge-desire pairs are responsible actors.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., section 1.3 of Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44, 174 (1994): 65-74.

<sup>4</sup> The claim that knowledge is a mental state is not common in contemporary philosophy, but Jennifer Nagel notes that diverse historical figures from Plato to Locke characterized knowledge as a mental state and it is common to do so in psychology; Jennifer Nagel, "Knowledge as a Mental State," *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 4 (2013): 273-274, 276-281. At 274, Nagel suggests that it is the mainstream of contemporary philosophy that has "gone wrong."

<sup>5</sup> Justification and belief are thus explained in those terms. Belief, for instance, is an attempt at knowledge; belief "aims at knowledge," but mere belief is a failed attempt. See generally section 1.5 of Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*. The phrase "aims at knowledge" appears at 48. Chapter 10 serves partially as an argument for this position and the phrase reappears at 208. The failure of mere belief is stated at 47 ("Mere believing is a botched kind of knowing").

## 1. Preliminary Notes on the “Knowledge” in “Knowledge-First”

Before analyzing the role of knowledge as the explanation and norm for action, it is worth mentioning a few pertinent points about how Williamson understands knowledge. Williamson claims that knowledge is a mental state. It is unique because it is both factive and unanalyzable:

To know is not merely to believe while various other conditions are met; it is to be in a new kind of state, a factive one.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge nonetheless shares many important features with other mental states. Indeed, Williamson chooses not to define “mental state” in *Knowledge and its Limits*.<sup>7</sup> He instead compares knowledge with paradigmatic mental states and highlights the similarities between them. Similarities between mental states, then, partially constitute our understanding of Williamson-ian knowledge.

Controversially, Williamson lists the non-luminosity of knowledge as consistent with other mental states. This non-luminosity is central to the present discussion. According to Williamson, a given condition is luminous iff

[f]or every case  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  C obtains, then in  $\alpha$  one is in a position to know that C obtains.<sup>8</sup>

Knowledge is not luminous.<sup>9</sup> This is partly due to margin for error conditions of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge requires not being wrong in very close situations.<sup>11</sup> It is, in other words, subject to a safety condition:

If one knows, one could not easily have been wrong in a similar case. In that sense, one’s belief is safely true.<sup>12</sup>

One cannot know if one is in a good case or a nearby bad case.

Knowledge’s failure to iterate, demonstrated by Williamson-ian knowledge’s failure to recognize the so-called ‘KK principle,’ both serves as further evidence of its non-luminosity and helps to establish safety concerns. The KK principle asserts that to know, one must know that one knows. Employing a

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<sup>6</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 95.

<sup>9</sup> See Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, section 4.4 for the argument against it. Despite appearances to the contrary, Williamson repeatedly notes that it is not a Sorites argument, e.g., at 98, 102. An application of anti-luminosity appears in Chapter 5, beginning at 114.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 147.

principle of charity, Williamson's special case of KK restricts KK to avoid many objections; it reads:

(KK) For any pertinent proposition  $p$ , if [a person] knows  $p$  then he knows that he knows  $p$ .<sup>13</sup>

Williamson denies this principle. He writes that "our knowledge is pervaded by failures of the KK principle" and there are many cases where one can know "something pertinent without knowing that he knows it."<sup>14</sup>

Knowledge is not even transparent on Williamson's account. Epistemic transparency, wherein "for every mental state  $S$ , whenever one is suitably alert and conceptually sophisticated, one is in a position to know whether one is in  $S$ ," is a "myth."<sup>15</sup> Knowing  $p$  does not entail even being in a position to know that you know  $p$ .<sup>16</sup> Thus,

[o]ne can know something without being in a position to know that one knows it....[O]ne can know that one knows something without being in a position to know that one knows that one knows it.<sup>17</sup>

KK's failure is unsurprising once one accepts that reliability also need not iterate:

One can be reliable without being reliably reliable. Since knowledge requires reliability, it is hardly surprising that one can know without knowing that one knows.<sup>18</sup>

The non-luminosity of knowledge is not unique among mental states. According to Williamson, *no* non-trivial mental state is luminous. For *every* mental state, there will be cases where I am in it but do not know that I am in it (or not in it and not know that I am not in it). Knowledge is no worse than any other mental state. There may be some trivial cases of luminosity, but they are rare:

Luminous conditions are curiosities. Far from forming a cognitive home, they are remote from our everyday interests. The conditions with which we engage in our everyday life are, from the start, non-luminous.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 115.

<sup>14</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 119. See section 5.1 for the full 'Mr. Magoo' example.

<sup>15</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 24, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 11, 95.

<sup>17</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 109.

There is no core set of mental states to which we have special epistemic access.<sup>20</sup> To the extent that non-trivial epistemic access is possible, knowledge provides it:

Any genuine requirement of privileged access on mental states is met by the state of knowing *p*. Knowing is characteristically open to first-person present-tense access; like other mental states, it is not perfectly open.<sup>21</sup>

Knowledge, then, is on a par with other mental states with respect to luminosity. If this is true, the value of a given mental state as a norm must be determined on other grounds. Williamson suggests its explanatory power makes it the norm for action. Unfortunately, it is not clear that it can play the explanatory or normative roles if it is not luminous. The value of knowledge may once again rely on it being a luminous condition.

## 2. Knowledge and the Explanation of Action

One of the key values of adopting a knowledge-first epistemology is its connection to action. For knowledge-first adherents, knowledge both helps explain actions in a manner that other theories cannot, and serves as a norm for action. It plays a role in explaining action that no non-factive notion can play. In Williamson's picture, one will act differently when acting on the basis of a knowledge-desire pair rather than a belief-desire pair. Normatively justified intentional action should be the result of knowledge-desire pairs. The remainder of this piece examines whether non-luminous knowledge can play this explanatory role and serve as the norm for intentional action.

Knowledge as the norm for action is not dealt with in-depth in *Knowledge and its Limits*, but Williamson's argument for knowledge as the norm for assertion in that text helps establish the sufficiency criteria for the claim that knowledge plays a similar normative role for action. Chapter 11 examines the important normative relationship between knowledge and assertion. Knowledge serves as the norm of assertion: "The rule of assertion is the knowledge rule; one must not assert *p* unless one knows *p*."<sup>22</sup> According to Williamson, it "could not have been otherwise."<sup>23</sup> Knowledge can be overridden by other norms, but is the generally operative norm of assertion.<sup>24</sup> Mere true belief or even probabilistic justified true belief fails to explain the evidential norms for assertion. In the case of a lottery, for instance, you cannot assert that your friend did not win despite extraordinarily

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<sup>20</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 93.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 249.

<sup>23</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 367.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 256.

large chances that s/he lost until you know that s/he lost. Even if your statement that s/he lost was true, you could be faulted for saying so without knowing so. This is common in everyday language. The knowledge account explains the inadequacy of probabilistic grounds for assertion and is confirmed by our conversational patterns.<sup>25</sup>

A similar argument can be made in the case of action. One important motivation for the knowledge-first program is that it accounts for the relationship between knowledge and causation. Williamson's account of knowledge does not use "justified," "caused," "reliable" and related concepts, but he rightly notes that he must explain the connection between knowledge and these related concepts since "knowing seems to be highly sensitive to such factors over wide ranges of cases."<sup>26</sup> The special explanatory role of knowledge in causation helps explain why knowledge is the norm for assertion. Similarly, knowledge is the norm for action largely because it is the most natural candidate for explaining action.

It is worth examining Williamson's main case where knowledge alone can sufficiently explain an individual's actions. According to Williamson, there are many cases where one cannot substitute true belief for knowledge without suffering from explanatory loss.<sup>27</sup> His key case concerns a robber ransacking a home in search of a diamond. When the robber spends the night in the home, he risks discovery. The best causal explanation for his action is that he knew there was a diamond in the home. According to Williamson,

the probability of his ransacking the house all night, conditional on his having entered it believing that there was a diamond in it, is lower than the probability if his ransacking it all night, conditional on his having entered it knowing that there was a diamond in it.<sup>28</sup>

Replacing knowledge with true belief would weaken the explanation "by lowering the probability of the explanandum conditional on the explanans."<sup>29</sup> Knowledge explains why the robber acts differently and why it is responsible for him to do so.

Williamson is not alone in positing a knowledge norm for action. Williamson's case-based argument can be supplemented by considering his peers. John Gibbons likewise argues for a causal connection between knowledge (which he also views as a mental state) and action. According to Gibbons,

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<sup>25</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 252-253.

<sup>26</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 61-62.

<sup>28</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, 62.

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there is always more to intentional action than beliefs and desires [outside the attempts context]... Part of what is involved in the more complete explanation of intentional action is knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

Knowledge is necessary to explain any intentional action. Mere belief will not suffice since

when you act on a false belief, you will not, except by accident, do what you intend. If your psychological explanations make reference to what you believe as well as the truth of those beliefs, this amounts to the claim that truth is psychologically relevant.<sup>31</sup>

Even justified true belief is not causally efficacious;

Explanations of action do not just rely on the attribution of true belief. They rely on attributions of knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

Knowledge plays a crucial part in the causal role of explanation. The world has to comply with one's belief to move him or her to action. The world is thus causally relevant. One must, in turn, know something about the world in order to *intentionally* act. To intentionally act, one must know how to perform an action. This requires a "non[-]accidentally effective action plan" for so doing.<sup>33</sup> Any "explanation of intentional action will presuppose knowledge and control on the part of the agent."<sup>34</sup> Intentional action requires control over that action and this requires knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

This explanatory value is potentially even more important to Gibbons than it is to Williamson. On Gibbons' view, establishing the causal explanatory value of knowledge is not merely necessary to establish that knowledge is a special mental state that can serve as the norm for action, but is necessary for establishing knowledge as a mental state in the first place:

Unconscious mental states count as mental states because they play a systematic role in the explanation and production of behavior, and they do so in virtue of their content. Knowledge counts as a kind of mental state for the same reason.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> John Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXII, 3 (2001): 580.

<sup>31</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 586.

<sup>32</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 587.

<sup>33</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 587-588, 590.

<sup>34</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 595.

<sup>35</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 591.

<sup>36</sup> Gibbons, "Knowledge in Action," 599-600.

In either case, knowledge must be a mental state that can better explain at least a broad class of actions if it is to serve as the norm for action. As the following demonstrates, Williamson's own example raises questions about whether knowledge as he understands it can serve this explanatory role.

### 3. A Potential Tension

It is not clear that Williamson's position on the explanatory power of knowledge accords with his anti-luminosity argument. Williamson-ian knowledge does not need to be iterated, but it is unclear whether he can properly explain the case of the robber without iteration. Some of Williamson's critics claim that these explanations do not require knowledge; a constitutive factor of knowledge can do the same thing.<sup>37</sup> It is initially plausible to suggest that Williamson is right that these factors are explanatorily impoverished when compared to knowledge. Iterated knowledge, however, seems to provide the stronger explanation for the robber staying in the house and exposing himself to risk than non-iterated or non-iterable knowledge. It is worth considering whether non-iterated knowledge is more explanatorily efficacious than its competitor epistemic mental states. If not, then there is a potential tension between Williamson's argument against the luminosity of knowledge and his argument for the knowledge norm of action.

When introducing Williamson's argument for the knowledge norm of action, I began by considering his argument for the knowledge norm of assertion. This argument has been forcefully critiqued by David Sosa.<sup>38</sup> A similar defect to the one identified by Sosa also applies to Williamson's argument for the knowledge norm of action. According to Sosa, the main argument for the knowledge norm of assertion is that it explains the "oddity" of asserting (1) "*P* but I don't know that *P*." "(1) cannot be known" and only the assertion of that which one knows is felicitous.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, this approach does not generalize because it cannot account for the oddness of "*P* but I don't know whether I know that *p*" without postulating the KK principle.<sup>40</sup> This move is unavailable to Williamson and most of his colleagues in the knowledge-first movement. Moreover, it may require further iteration that Sosa finds unacceptable. He thinks the view

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<sup>37</sup> E.g., Bernard Molyneux suggests firm belief can do the same thing; Bernard Molyneux, "Primeness, Internalism and Explanatory Generality," *Philosophical Studies* 135, 2 (2007): 255-277. Nagel, "Knowledge as a Mental State" questions this approach.

<sup>38</sup> David Sosa, "Dubious assertions," *Philosophical Studies* 146 (2009): 269-272.

<sup>39</sup> Sosa, "Dubious assertions," 270.

<sup>40</sup> Sosa, "Dubious assertions," 270.

will have to be strengthened implausibly, to require, for every level, knowledge that you know...that you know that  $p$ .<sup>41</sup>

The knowledge norm of assertion only accounts for several common examples of odd assertions with epistemic content when the knowledge that can play this normative role is iterable and, on Sosa's account, frequently iterated.

Given the similarities between Williamson's arguments for the knowledge norm of assertion and the knowledge norm of action respectively, it is unsurprising that the defect with Williamson's argument for the knowledge norm of assertion that Sosa identifies has a parallel in Williamson's argument for the knowledge norm of action. Given the threat of regress in the knowledge norm of assertion case and problems with other candidates, Sosa holds that

we should consider giving up on the presupposition that there is a particular norm distinctive of assertion as such.<sup>42</sup>

This piece does not support a similar skepticism about a particular norm distinctive of action, but it questions Williamson's attempt at identifying this norm. Knowledge may be the unique norm for action, but the type of knowledge that can play this role and explain why people should and do act differently depending on their credal states is not the type Williamson suggests must come first in our epistemic endeavors.

Williamson's main argument for the knowledge norm of action is its ability to explain both why actions on the basis of knowledge-desire pairs differ from actions on the basis of belief-desire pairs in similar circumstances and why we think that only the person who acts on the basis of a knowledge-desire pair acts responsibly when s/he performs what would otherwise be the same act as one acting on the basis of a belief-desire pair. Just as in the case of assertion, however, it is not clear that non-luminous knowledge plays this role in many cases.

Even consideration of Williamson's key case makes this worry clear. Recall the claim that a robber who knows that there is a diamond in the house would stay longer than a similar robber who only believes a diamond is present. This claim is questionable. A robber who knows that he knows that there is a diamond in the house is more likely to stay in the house than a robber who does not know that he knows that there is a diamond in the house. Spending the night ransacking the house is a considerable investment of time and risk. This time expenditure and assumption of risk is more likely when one has higher order epistemic content than when one lacks it. This fact alone suggests that those acting on the basis of an

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<sup>41</sup> Sosa, "Dubious assertions," 271.

<sup>42</sup> Sosa, "Dubious assertions," 271.



iterated knowledge-desire pair will act differently than those acting on the basis of a knowledge-desire or belief-desire pair. One without iterated knowledge will stop searching earlier than someone with iterated knowledge. This raises concerns about the explanatory role of Williamson-ian knowledge; it does not seem to account for all epistemic state-dependent differences in action.

Indeed, there is even reason to suggest that only those acting on the basis of an iterated knowledge-desire pair will act differently than those acting on the basis of a belief-desire pair. One can plausibly argue that the robber needs to know that s/he knows that there is a diamond in the house for him or her to stay in the house longer than an individual with a justified true belief. If one does not know that one knows that there is a diamond in the house, one may be acting on the basis of something functionally equivalent to a justified true belief. Lack of knowledge about one's epistemic states will forestall one's acting on the basis of reasons that epistemic state may give him or her. Whether these people do act differently is a task for experimental philosophers; those who posit an uniterable knowledge norm of action face the onus of proving that uniterable knowledge motivates people in different ways than belief. If the person with knowledge only stays in the house for the same amount of time as the person with a justified true belief, then only iterated knowledge plays the explanatory role in action that helps explain why there is a knowledge norm of action.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that people do not act on the basis of knowledge is not enough to undermine the knowledge norm of action, even if it does undermine the purported explanatory power of that norm. As Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa plausibly argues, the knowledge norm of practical reasoning merely posits reasons people have to act in certain ways and does not provide an account of what reasons are sufficient for those actions.<sup>44</sup> The person with knowledge may have

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<sup>43</sup> Knowledge may not always need to be iterable for it to explain why people act differently than those with mere justified true beliefs, to justify their different actions or to merely give them reason to act differently. My point stands if knowledge simply needs to be iterable in many cases. Since Williamson's argument relies on the robbery case, the fact that his case requires iterable knowledge is important, but my general point that only an iterable knowledge norm for action generalizes stands even if knowledge does not need to be iterable in this specific case.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, "Knowledge Norms and Acting Well," *Thought* 1 (2012): 49-55. At 49, Ichikawa goes on to conclude that "cases where knowledge is present but action is intuitively unwarranted provide not traction against the knowledge norm". Given the fact that Williamson's argument appeals to our intuitions about a case, one is nonetheless justified in focusing on whether action is warranted there. On Ichikawa's construction, one needs to suggest that knowledge gives one no further reason to act than mere belief to undermine the

reason to stay longer than the person with a mere belief, even if s/he does not act on it. The argument in this piece is not, however, merely empirical. Normatively, we could fault an individual for exposing him/herself to major risk without knowing that s/he knows that there is a diamond in the house that potentially justifies said risk. One can also question Williamson's claim that only the person who acts on the basis of a knowledge-desire pair acts responsibly when s/he performs what would otherwise be the same act as one acting on the basis of a mere belief-desire pair. One may think that only the person who knows that s/he knows should stay in the house longer than the person with a mere belief, particularly given the high stakes involved.<sup>45</sup> Once more the onus is on Williamson to prove otherwise. The fact that so many questions remain in his key case presents an issue for his broader project.

#### 4. Conclusion

Williamson would almost certainly suggest that the problem identified above (and indeed any problem) concerning anti-luminosity besets any theory; my critique does not uniquely apply to his view. Williamson is only able to assert that knowledge is the norm for action because it is the most natural candidate for explaining this and other norms. This claim requires an explanation of how knowledge can be a mental state on par with any other despite not being luminous. Williamson's solution is easy. As we noted above, Williamson claims that no mental state is luminous. If, however, one of the most valuable aspects of his view cannot accord with the anti-luminosity of knowledge, Williamson would be in trouble. Two central aspects of his theory failing to cohere would be a problem. Proving that other mental states are non-luminous may place knowledge on a par with other mental states, but it seems to place it on a par with other mental states as an explanatory mechanism as well. Williamson cannot adopt KK to salvage a knowledge norm of action. Now that the tension in his view is clear, however, his followers must either adopt KK or supplement Williamson's picture with another mechanism. I will do so elsewhere. For now, it suffices to note how Williamson's argument against luminosity causes problems for his account of action.

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knowledge norm of action. Even then, it is not obvious that it provides such a reason in the robbery case.

<sup>45</sup> A separate paper looking at the knowledge norm of action, high stakes and pragmatic encroachment is in progress, so I will not belabor the point here. High stakes may even change our determinations on when we have *any* reason to act, as in the construction in the preceding footnote.

Knowledge is better placed to explain actions than other, non-factive mental states. This makes it a plausible candidate for the norm of action. The primacy of knowledge absent this explanatory and normative value is questionable. Where knowledge is not luminous, however, its ability to account for how individuals do and should act is undermined.<sup>46</sup>

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