

“Williamson on the Evidence for Skepticism”  
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*ABSTRACT:* Timothy Williamson has offered a novel approach to refuting external world skepticism in his influential book, *Knowledge and Its Limits*. The strategy employed by Williamson is to show that skeptics falsely attribute too much self-knowledge to the epistemic agent when they claim that one’s evidence is the same when in a “good case” as it would be in a similar “bad case.” Williamson argues that one’s evidence is not the same in a good case as it would be in a bad case. My contention is that Williamson’s account fails. In order to make his case against skepticism, Williamson must attribute an overly strong conception of evidence to the skeptic, which can be avoided by appealing to a phenomenal concept of evidence. Thus, a different approach must be taken to avoid skeptical consequences.

In the eighth chapter of *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Timothy Williamson attempts to undermine a case for a certain kind of epistemological skepticism by arguing that the skeptic incorrectly assumes that rational thinkers are always in a position to know what their evidence is (Williamson 2000). The skeptic’s error, according to Williamson, is that he attributes too much self-knowledge to the knower. In this paper, I aim to criticize Williamson’s view by arguing that Williamson’s response to skepticism is unsuccessful because he presumptuously saddles the skeptic with an excessively strong position on evidence. I will begin by presenting Williamson’s case against skepticism and then proceed to explicate my criticism.

I.

The brand of skepticism that Williamson challenges is “external world skepticism.” On this skeptical hypothesis, one’s evidence provides an equally strong basis for the conclusion that one is in a “good case” as it is for concluding one is in a “bad case.” A good case (GC) is defined as a circumstance where things appear as they generally do, and things are that way; one believes some proposition  $p$  and  $p$  is true; by

ordinary standards, one knows  $p$ . A bad case (BC) is defined as a circumstance where things still appear as they generally do, but things are different than they appear; one still believes  $p$  but  $p$  is false; by all standards one fails to know  $p$  since only true propositions can be known. Notice that BC is so bad that if one were to believe that one were in BC, even that belief would not count as knowledge since by definition a person in BC would have no justification for this belief. Consequently, in BC all of one's judgments about the external world fail to count as knowledge.

The skeptic's strategy is straightforward. If one's evidence is the same regardless whether one is in GC or BC, then one has no rational basis for concluding that one is in GC rather than BC. On this point Williamson concedes "it is difficult not to feel sympathy for the sceptic" (Williamson 2000: 174). Thus, for Williamson, the skeptical argument is not averted by correcting a flaw in reasoning, but rather, it is undermined by showing that the skeptical argument rests on a faulty premise. After all, the skeptic cannot stipulate that one's evidence is the same in both GC and BC. To assume *that* would be tantamount to assuming the skeptical conclusion that is under question. Therefore, the skeptic must put forward some argument for the claim that one's evidence is the same in GC and BC.

The argument for sameness of evidence that Williamson attributes to the skeptic is a *reductio*, which follows from this valid argument (Williamson 2000:169-170):

1. Assume (for *reductio*) that the evidence in GC and BC is different.
2. If one is in BC, then one can deduce that one is not in GC (since one's evidence would be different (from (1))).
3. But (2) is false (everyone, including anti-skeptics, believe this).
4. Therefore, it is not the case that one's evidence is different in GC and BC.

Williamson denies the veracity of the second premise on the grounds that the “argument assumes that in the bad case one knows what one’s evidence is” (Williamson 2000: 170). In order to justify the kind of deduction that skeptics need for the second premise of this *reductio* to proceed, Williamson attributes this implicit assumption to the skeptic (Williamson 2000: 170-71):

(P) For any appropriate property  $\pi$ , in any case where one’s evidence has  $\pi$ , one knows that one’s evidence has  $\pi$ .

Williamson explains that he uses “evidence” in (P) to mean “total evidence,” rather than a single item of evidence. What he means by the “appropriate properties” of one’s evidence, however, is not perspicuous. Williamson suggests that he understands appropriate properties to consist of “the content of one’s evidence” and that “being known to have such a property need not itself be intrinsic to the content of the evidence” (Williamson 2000: 171). Williamson cannot import the external properties of mental content (see Williamson 2000: 49-64) without trivially falsifying (P). In other words, if Williamson were to maintain that one of the appropriate properties of one’s evidence would include whether it was in fact caused by being in GC or BC, then demonstrating the difference in one’s evidence would obviously succeed, but this would hardly impress any skeptic. Apparently, Williamson wants to restrict the appropriate properties of one’s evidence to properties that are intrinsic to the content of one’s evidence. I shall proceed on this understanding of “appropriate properties of one’s evidence,” although I shall revisit this characterization when parsing out my criticism of this point later.

To show that (P) is false, Williamson employs the following sorites argument (Williamson 2000: 175-77):

- (2<sub>*i*</sub>) For any appropriate property  $\pi$ , if in  $\alpha_{i-1}$  one's evidence lacks  $\pi$ , then in  $\alpha_i$  one knows that in  $\alpha_{i-1}$  one's evidence lacks  $\pi$ .
- (3<sub>*i*</sub>) It is consistent with what one knows in  $\alpha_i$  that one is in  $\alpha_{i-1}$ .
- (4<sub>*i*</sub>) In  $\alpha_i$  one's evidence has  $\pi$ .
- (5<sub>*i*</sub>) In  $\alpha_{i-1}$  one's evidence lacks  $\pi$ . (assumption for reductio)
- (6<sub>*i*</sub>) In  $\alpha_i$  one knows that in  $\alpha_{i-1}$  one's evidence lacks  $\pi$ . (from 2<sub>*i*</sub> & 5<sub>*i*</sub>)
- (7<sub>*i*</sub>) In  $\alpha_i$  one knows that one's evidence has  $\pi$ . (from (P) & 4<sub>*i*</sub>)
- (8<sub>*i*</sub>) It is inconsistent with what one knows in  $\alpha_i$  that one is in  $\alpha_{i-1}$ . (from 6<sub>*i*</sub> & 7<sub>*i*</sub>)
- (9<sub>*i*</sub>) In  $\alpha_{i-1}$ , one's evidence has  $\pi$ . (3<sub>*i*</sub> & 8<sub>*i*</sub> contradiction; deny assumption 5<sub>*i*</sub>)
- (10<sub>*i*</sub>) If in  $\alpha_i$  one's evidence has  $\pi$ , then in  $\alpha_{i-1}$ , one's evidence has  $\pi$ .  
(conditionalizing 9<sub>*i*</sub> on 4<sub>*i*</sub>)
- (11<sub>*i*</sub>) If in  $\alpha_i$  one's evidence has not- $\pi$ , then in  $\alpha_{i-1}$ , one's evidence has not- $\pi$ .
- (12<sub>*i*</sub>) One's evidence in  $\alpha_{i-1}$  has the same appropriate properties as one's evidence in  $\alpha_i$ .

From (12<sub>0</sub>), ... , (12<sub>*n*</sub>), we get:

- (13) One's evidence in  $\alpha_0$  has the same appropriate properties as one's evidence in  $\alpha_n$ .

This whole argument rests on the assumption (P). Since (13) is obviously false (and is derived from the assumption (P)), then (P) is false. To get a better idea of what I take Williamson's argument to be, consider this following instantiation of it. Suppose one is inspecting one's evidence of the color of some red image. Across a long span of time, the red image is slowly changing to yellow, but the change is so gradual that one cannot detect any change in the image's color from one millisecond to the next. At some middle point ( $\alpha_i$ ) the image will be red, even though at the next millisecond ( $\alpha_{i+1}$ ) it will cease to be red. Given that the change is so subtle as to be undetectable to the human eye, the person inspecting his evidence (as to what is the image's color) will not be in a position to know that his evidence does not have the property of being red. This

argument is similar to Williamson's argument against luminosity (Williamson 2000: 97-98).

Assuming that the sorites argument is successful, the moral is clear: one is not always in a position to know all of the appropriate properties of one's own evidence. Williamson explains that when in BC one's evidence appears exactly similar to when one is in GC not because the evidence is exactly similar in both cases, but rather due to BC being so bad that one lacks evidence of its badness (Williamson 2000: 177, 180). When in GC, however, one is sometimes, perhaps even often, in a position to know what one's evidence is. Consequently, when in GC one has considerably more evidence, which also explains why one's evidence is not the same in both cases. According to Williamson, the skeptical argument fails because the skeptic incorrectly assumes that in BC one is in a position to know what one's evidence is.

## II.

A critical problem for Williamson's response to skepticism is that the concept of evidence that he requires the skeptic to use in order to establish sameness of evidence is unnecessarily strong. Recall that Williamson commits the skeptic to use (P) in order to establish that one has the same evidence in GC as in BC. A natural response to this point is to question whether the skeptic is committed to something as strong as (P) to prove sameness of evidence. If some other account can be used by the skeptic to establish sameness of evidence, then Williamson's response will not engage the most plausible accounts of external world skepticism.

Richard Fumerton discusses several problems with Williamson's (P) (Fumerton 2000: 629-35). One worry Fumerton raises for (P) is that it might generate an infinite

regress (Fumerton 2000: 631). For example, if one of the appropriate properties of one's evidence is knowing that one's evidence has some property E, then in order to know that one's evidence possesses E one would have to know that one knows one's evidence has E and so on *ad infinitum*. In response, Williamson suggests that by restricting appropriate properties to the intrinsic content of one's evidence the regress is avoided (Williamson 2000: 171). This is important, not simply because this shows how Williamson avoids a vicious regress, but this response also reinforces that Williamson takes the appropriate properties of one's evidence to be limited to the intrinsic content of one's evidence. In other words, any appeal to the extrinsic content of one's evidence (e.g., the evidence's being caused by being in GC) in (P) is going to be disastrous for Williamson's (P) principle.

Given that for (P) Williamson must limit appropriate properties to features that are intrinsic to one's evidence, the skeptic can use a phenomenal concept of evidence that establishes sameness of evidence. The phenomenal concept of evidence limits the properties of one's evidence to the way it appears or seems. One can use testimonial evidence to illustrate how the phenomenal concept of evidence establishes sameness (see Fumerton 2000: 631-32). Consider a group of alleged eyewitnesses that uniformly testify that some person has committed a murder. (Assume there is no defeating evidence that overturns the testimonial evidence: they have no known motive to convict the man on trial, etc.) In this case, we would seem to have good reason to believe the person is guilty of murder. When the testifiers give their testimony veridically this is analogous to being in GC; when the testifiers give their testimony falsely this is analogous to being in BC.

Now the skeptic can press Williamson with the following question: what are the different intrinsic features of one's evidence (e.g., the alleged eyewitness testimony) when the testimony is veridical as opposed to when the testimony is false? The obvious answer is that there are no intrinsic differences between the veridical and false testimonies. Of course, there are *some* differences between veridical and false testimonies. For example, in the case of veridical testimony, part of the cause for that evidence will include the purported event occurring in such a way that the testifier witnessed it. But to make this an appropriate property of one's evidence would include an extrinsic feature, which we have already seen entails disastrous consequences when used in (P). I see no other choice than to conclude that when discerning veridical and false testimony the intrinsic features are identical.

After one concedes that the intrinsic features of testimony are not sufficient to determine GC from BC, one is not far from admitting that the phenomenal concept of evidence is sufficient for justifying the skeptic's position on sameness of evidence for all empirical claims. Consider what one's evidence is for any belief concerning the external world and how the intrinsic character would differ from a vivid hallucinatory experience. As I type on my computer right now, I inspect the data given by my empirical senses regarding the appearance of the computer, the room, the scent of my coffee, and other features of my experience. What feature (or features) of my evidence indicates that these experiences constitute a GC or a BC? Presumably, the intrinsic features of my current experiences would be the same (e.g., they would both be like *this*) whether these experiences are part of a GC or a BC. Certainly the extrinsic features of my evidence would be different when these experiences are part of a BC rather than a GC, but we have

seen that extrinsic differences are off-limits to Williamson's understanding of appropriate properties in (P). Therefore, the skeptic seems justified in maintaining that there is phenomenal sameness of evidence.

The crux of Williamson's argument against phenomenal sameness presumably is that there is some intrinsic difference between one's evidence in GC and BC, but that the intrinsic difference is not always perceptible. To motivate this claim, Williamson uses his sorites-style argument to demonstrate that one may not be in a position to determine what are the intrinsic features of one's own evidence. Perhaps in the examples cited above (i.e., testimony and typing on my computer) there is some subtle intrinsic feature of my evidence that I simply cannot detect because Williamson is correct about my awareness of my own evidence. Maybe Williamson takes the *factive state* that partially constitutes veridical evidence to be an intrinsic property that shows the intrinsic differences between evidence in GC and BC. Without some rejoinder to this aspect of Williamson's argument against skepticism, his response retains some plausibility.

While I am inclined to think that Williamson's sorites argument is a total failure,<sup>1</sup> it is not necessary to argue for this strong claim to show that the sorites argument is no help to Williamson's case against skepticism. One can accept Williamson's sorites argument, but maintain that its implications are not typical for relevant instances of our evidence with skepticism. If Williamson's sorites argument works at all, it seems that it would only work in situations where one is required to discern differences in evidential properties that change gradually and infinitesimally across a long period of time. As many of Williamson's critics have pointed out, his sorites argument shows—if it shows anything at all—only that one may fail in a small way to discern the appropriate

properties of one's own evidence (Fumerton 2000: 634; Conee 2005: 449-50; Hawthorne 2005: 452-44; McGrew and McGrew 2007: chapter 5). The idea is that Williamson's sorites argument is only applicable to cases where the intrinsic appropriate properties of one's evidence lie on some finely grained continuum. Unfortunately for Williamson, the appropriate properties of one's evidence that would be different in one's evidence for GC and BC do not lie on a gradual continuum. Unlike when an image changes color or when one goes from feeling cold to warm, there are no gradual stages between being in GC and BC. In order for Williamson's sorites argument to assist him in his response to skepticism, the burden is on him to show how gradual, infinitesimal changes in one's evidence are applicable to changes in one's evidence between GC and BC. When it comes to evidence in GC and BC, the changes do not lie on a graded continuum. Thus, the sorites argument will not help him argue against skepticism.

What about the possibility that one of the intrinsic properties of one's evidence is its being constituted by some factive state? Since Williamson takes *knowing* to be an unanalyzable, factive mental state (see Williamson 2000: 23-33), he might plausibly appeal to factiveness being an intrinsic property of one's evidence. If this is so, then Williamson is not guilty of importing extrinsic features as properties for his evidence. The problem with this move is that for *knowing* to count as a mental state, Williamson construes mental states *broadly* such that features of the world are constituent parts of the mental state (see Williamson 2000: 21-22, 47-54). If a similar move is considered to help motivate factiveness as an intrinsic property of one's evidence, then counting this property as "intrinsic" is merely a semantic shift. Clearly, the conditions under which some evidence would possess the property of factiveness would be entirely causal or

relational. So, even if one claims that an intrinsic property of one's evidence depends on whether it is factive, there is no reason to expect this property to be known by inspecting the phenomenal character of one's evidence.

From this discussion of evidence it seems difficult for Williamson to provide a principled reason to disallow skeptics from using a phenomenological concept of evidence. Once the skeptic is allowed to make this move, Williamson is out of ways to block the skeptic's conclusion that phenomenologically one's evidence is intrinsically the same in GC and BC. Williamson's attempt to require the skeptic to use his strong interpretation of (P) proved to rely on either extrinsic properties or properties that can be placed on a gradual continuum. Since the relevant features of one's properties when assessing external world skepticism cannot be defined extrinsically or placed on a gradual scale, Williamson's response fails to assess skepticism with a concept of evidence that obtains in skeptical scenarios.

### III.

Despite my criticisms, Williamson's case against skepticism is actually quite reasonable provided that one is not intending to present arguments that would refute the skeptic using premises the skeptic would accept. Skepticism is a difficult challenge in epistemology, and many contemporary epistemologists (especially among externalists) find it convenient to ignore skepticism rather than face it head-on.<sup>2</sup> Williamson bravely attempts to show how his brand of externalism can respond to one form of skepticism. Even though Williamson's response to skepticism is unsuccessful, there is still much to be learned by studying his approach. One way I have argued that Williamson's response fails is by defending some form of the skeptic's claim for sameness of evidence in GC as

in BC. Some might suspect that granting my defense is a short step to becoming a skeptic—a step that many people would consider unfortunate.

This would be unfortunate only if one thought the only way to rebut skepticism was to show that one's evidence is not phenomenally the same in GC as it is in BC. Broadly construed, I see two approaches to disprove skepticism. The approach taken by Williamson challenges the initial premise that one's evidence seems the same in GC and BC, but this approach does not dispute the reasoning that proceeds from this initial premise. The other approach grants the initial premise and challenges the reasoning that proceeds from it. The moral to be drawn by the failure of Williamson's valiant attempt to undermine the skeptical argument is that if one is going to answer skepticism, the more promising route is to question the skeptic's reasoning.

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<sup>1</sup> My criticisms are similar to the reasoning in (Conee 2005: 444-51) and (McGrew and McGrew 2007: chapter 5).

<sup>2</sup> At one point (Williamson 2000: 27) Williamson indicates that ignoring skepticism is the best way to avoid finding oneself in need of refuting it.

## Works Cited

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