

Is Evidence Knowledge?

Juan Comesaña and Holly Kantin

1 Introduction

In chapter 9 of *Knowledge and its Limits*,¹ Timothy Williamson argues for the thesis that the evidence that a subject has is constituted by propositions known by the subject (a thesis that he summarizes in the equation E=K). Moreover, Williamson also argues that whatever justifies a subject in believing a proposition is part of that subject's evidence, and thus that only propositions that a subject knows can justify further propositions for that subject. We will argue that such a position has two implausible consequences. First, it is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases. Second, it entails that a plausible principle of the closure of justification fails. But there are Gettier cases, and the closure principle is true. Therefore, evidence isn't knowledge.

2 E=K?

What does it mean to say that evidence is knowledge? Here is Williamson:

[I]n any possible situation in which one believes a proposition p , that belief is justified, if at all, by propositions q_1, \dots, q_n (usually other than p) which one knows. (...) Now assume further that what justifies belief is *evidence* (...). Then the supposition just made

¹Williamson (2000).

is equivalent to the principle that knowledge, and only knowledge, constitutes evidence. This chapter defends that principle; it equates S's evidence with S's knowledge, for every individual or community S in any possible situation. Call this equation E=K. (p. 185)

In light of this passage, we can formulate E=K as follows:

E=K: Something is part of S's evidence if and only if it is a proposition that S knows.

In what follows we will only be interested in the left-to-right direction of the E=K biconditional—which is, we think, the more problematic direction. That claim, that a proposition cannot be part of a subject's evidence unless the subject knows it, follows from the conjunction of the following two other claims, which (as he makes clear in the passage cited) Williamson also accepts:

E=K 1: The proposition that p justifies S in believing that q only if S knows that p .

E=K 2: Something is part of S's evidence only if it is a proposition that justifies S in believing some proposition q .

Our main target in this paper will be E=K 1. It is E=K 1 that is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases and the closure of justification. But if E=K 1 is false, then there is no reason to accept that E=K.

3 Gettier Cases

Consider one of the original Gettier cases:²

²Gettier (1963).

Coins. You are waiting to hear who among the candidates got a job. You hear the secretary say on the telephone that Jones got the job. You also see Jones empty his pockets and count his coins: he has ten. You are, then, justified in believing that Jones got the job and also that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. From these two beliefs of yours, you infer the conclusion that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. Unbeknownst to you, the secretary was wrong and Jones did not get the job; in fact, you did. By chance, you happen to have ten coins in your pocket.

In *Coins*, your true justified belief that whoever will get the job has three coins in his pocket does not amount to knowledge. In the two decades after the Gettier article appeared, many efforts to patch up the traditional account of knowledge failed to ever more complex Gettier-style cases.³ One common reaction to those failures is to claim that knowledge is not, after all, that important, and that the epistemologically central notion is that of justification. Against that thought, Williamson says:

Although it has been shown that *what is justified* need not be knowledge, even when it is true, it has not been shown that *what justifies* need not be knowledge (p. 185, emphasis in the original).

It is clear in the context that when Williamson says that it has been shown that what is justified need not be knowledge, even though it has not been shown that what justifies need not be knowledge, he means that it has been shown *by the existence of Gettier cases* that what is justified need not be knowledge. According to Williamson, then, accepting the existence of Gettier cases is no obstacle to E=K. But this is where he goes wrong. For, if Gettier cases such as *Coins* show that what is justified need not be knowledge, they also show that

³The history of those failures up to the early-80's can be found in Shope (1983).

what justifies need not be knowledge. Before arguing for that claim, it is worth noting that Williamson himself is committed to the existence of Gettier cases for another reason: a central part of his argument against the analyzability of ‘knowledge’ consists in pointing out the remarkable failure of attempts to come up with an analysis of propositional knowledge that is not vulnerable to Gettier-style cases—cf. Williamson (2000), p. 30.

What is justified in *Coins* is the belief that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. But what justifies the subject in having that belief is (in part) his *false* belief that Jones got the job. Given that knowledge entails truth, what justifies the subject is not knowledge. Therefore, *Coins* shows not only that what is justified need not be knowledge, but also that what justifies need not be knowledge—that is, pace Williamson, Gettier cases like *Coins* show that $E=K 1$ is false.⁴

There are only two ways of reconciling *Coins* with $E=K 1$: to claim that you are not justified in believing that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket; or to claim that everything that justifies you in that case are propositions that you know. Both possible answers seem to us highly implausible. We won’t say anything more about the first one,⁵ but we will say something about the second one.

The second strategy for reconciling cases such as *Coins* with $E=K 1$, then, consists in saying that what justifies you in those cases are propositions that

⁴It could be pointed out that, plausibly, there are Gettier-style cases that do not depend on the subject’s being justified in believing something false—see Feldman (1974). We do not wish to dispute this, but we notice that the existence of such cases is irrelevant to the incompatibility of cases such as *Coins* with $E=K 1$.

⁵Other than to note that Sutton (2005) defends a view that entails that there are no Gettier cases, and that Williamson (2004) makes the enigmatic claim that “a flat-out belief is fully justified if and only if it constitutes knowledge” (p. 284), while at the same time continuing to appeal to “Gettier’s refutation of the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief” (p. 283) (Williamson’s claim about full justification is made in the context of summarizing chapter 11 of *Knowledge and Its Limits*, where he argues for the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion, so he may be advancing the related claim that knowledge is the norm of belief, without implying that there cannot be false justified beliefs).

you know. What propositions that you know could plausibly be said to justify your belief that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket? Plausible *prima facie* candidates in that case are the proposition that Jones has ten coins in his pocket and the proposition that the secretary said that Jones got the job. Now, everyone should agree that the proposition that Jones has ten coins in his pocket is something that you know, and that is *part* of what justifies you in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. Everyone should also agree that the proposition that the secretary said that Jones got the job is something that you know (or, at the very least, something that you could easily come to know), and it certainly plays *some* role in justifying you in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. But for this strategy to work, it should be the case that *everything* that justifies you in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket is a proposition that you know. E=K 1 is the claim that a proposition *p* cannot be part of your justification for believing something unless you know that *p*. So, in order to reconcile cases like *Coins* with E=K 1, it is not enough to find some propositions that you know and that justify you, it is necessary to argue that *every* proposition that justifies you is something that you know.⁶ And there is no argument that we can think of to the effect that your belief that Jones got the job plays no part whatsoever in justifying you in thinking that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. Therefore, *Coins* is a counterexample to E=K 1.

Notice also that, even leaving aside the issue that, according to E=K, *every* proposition that justifies the subject has to be known, there are cases where it is hard to find *any* proposition that the subject knows and that justifies him. Consider for instance the following case:

⁶Couldn't Williamson say that things that justify you need not amount to knowledge as long as they are not part of your evidence? Not given E=K 2, to which Williamson is clearly committed (cf. Williamson (2000), pp. 207-208).

Sheep. Out in the field, I see what appears to be a sheep, and I form the belief that there is a sheep in the field. Unbeknownst to me, what I saw is a rock that looks like a sheep, but there is a real sheep behind the rock.

In *Sheep*, I have a justified true belief that there is a sheep in the field, but I do not know it. But, in this case, I do not infer my belief that there is a sheep in the field from any other belief of mine. The only plausible candidate would be the proposition that it seems to me that there is a sheep in the field. But in this case it is perfectly clear that we generally do not form beliefs of that sort.⁷

4 Justification and Closure

If our argument of the last section is correct, then E=K 1 is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases. In this section we consider a different, but related, objection to E=K 1.

Consider a very plausible principle of the closure of epistemic justification under competent deduction:

J-Closure: If S is justified in believing that p and S competently

⁷Now, given his commitment to both E=K 1 and E=K 2, Williamson has to argue that we do have those beliefs. Indeed, Williamson claims that “perceptual evidence in the case of illusions consists of (...) the proposition that things appear to be that way” (p. 198). This claim not only has the consequence that we *always* have beliefs as to how things appear (something for which Williamson argues), but it also has the consequence that two subjects who are exactly alike except for the fact that one of them is hallucinating a tree in front of him and the other one is seeing a tree are justified in believing that there is a tree in front of them *for different reasons*: the hallucinatory subject is justified in that belief in virtue (in part) of his knowledge that it appears as if there is a tree in front of him, whereas that belief plays no role in the justification of the normal subject. Williamson argues against what he calls “the phenomenal conception of evidence” that, according to him, underscores the intuition that two non-factive mental twins should be epistemic twins (that is, the intuition that there cannot be a difference in what propositions two subjects are justified in believing and for what reasons without a difference in their non-factive mental states). But, as we see it, this gets matters the wrong way around: what militates against E=K is the intuition that both subjects are justified for the same reasons, not some previous theoretical commitment to a phenomenal conception of evidence that underlies the intuition. At any rate, as we argued above, *Coins* itself is already a counterexample to E=K 1.

deduces that q from p , thereby coming to believe that q , without ceasing to be justified in believing that p , then S is justified in believing that q .⁸

There is much more discussion in the literature of closure principles for *knowledge* than there is of closure principles for justification—but that literature is still relevant because many alleged counterexamples to closure principles for knowledge are also taken to be counterexamples to closure principles for justification. We won't defend *J-Closure* here, but we sympathize with Richard Feldman when he says (and Feldman *is* talking about a closure principle for justification):

[T]he idea that no version of this principle is true strikes me, and many other philosophers, as one of the least plausible ideas to come down the philosophical pike in recent years.⁹

One of the reasons why we won't defend *J-Closure* is that we don't need to. We will argue that $E=K$ 1 is incompatible not only with *J-Closure* but with a much weaker claim as well. Usual counterexamples to closure involve what Hawthorne has called “manifestly heavyweight” propositions.¹⁰ Manifestly heavyweight propositions are propositions that elicit skeptical intuitions, because they are such that it is hard to see *how* they could be known. The intuition may be overridden by further reflection and theorizing, but it is nonetheless there.¹¹ Some examples of heavyweight propositions are the proposition that we are not brains in vats and the proposition that our belief-forming processes

⁸We model *J-Closure* on the closure principle for knowledge defended in Hawthorne (2004), p. 29.

⁹Feldman (1995), p. 487. Notice that Williamson himself thinks that a principle of closure for knowledge holds—cf. Williamson (2000), p. 117.

¹⁰Hawthorne (2004), who takes the “heavyweight” talk from Dretske (2004).

¹¹We are paraphrasing Hawthorne's characterization of the notion of manifestly heavyweight propositions, but we wish to remain neutral regarding how widespread the intuitive reaction is. We agree wholeheartedly that it is one thing to deny closure for heavyweight propositions and a different (and quite more implausible) thing to deny it even for lightweight propositions.

are reliable. In general, philosophers who claim that closure fails mean that it fails when the proposition inferred is a heavyweight proposition. Let us say that if closure fails even for cases where the inferred proposition is not heavyweight (when it is, as we will say, “lightweight”), then closure fails *miserably*. In general, then, even philosophers who claim that closure fails don’t think that closure fails miserably. But if E=K 1 is true, then closure fails miserably.

Here is a brief argument that shows that E=K 1 is incompatible with *J-Closure*. According to E=K 1, a belief that p can justify S in believing something only if S knows that p . But let us suppose that S is justified in believing that p but doesn’t know that p —a possibility that, as we said in the previous section, Williamson admits. If that is so, then S is not justified in believing that q , even if she is justified in believing (indeed, even if she knows) that p entails q and she deduces that q on this basis without ceasing to be justified in believing that p —for S ’s evidence for q is p , and S doesn’t know p . Therefore, if E=K 1 is true, then closure fails.

Moreover, if E=K 1 then closure fails miserably. To see this, let us go back to the example that we named *Coins*, where you justifiably and truly, but not knowingly, believe that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us add to the case that you then competently deduce that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket. Aren’t you *thereby* justified in believing that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket? *J-Closure* (and intuition) say “Yes,” E=K 1 says “No.”¹² But the proposition that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket is a *lightweight* implication of the proposition that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Therefore, if E=K 1 is true then closure fails miserably.

For another example, suppose that Terry is a recently envatted human. On

¹²It is compatible with E=K 1 that you are justified in believing that whoever will get the job has money in his pocket, but not *in virtue of* competently deducing it from your belief that whoever will get the job has ten coins in his pocket—hence the “thereby.”

the basis of an experience very much like the one that you have when you are facing a dog in front of you, Terry believes that there is a dog in front of her. Of course, Terry doesn't know that there is a dog in her neighborhood (if only because it is false, let us suppose, but not *only* because of that), but she is still *justified* in believing it. She then deduces from that belief that there is an animal in front of her. Isn't she *thereby* justified in believing that there is an animal in front of her? Not according to E=K1. But the proposition that there is an animal in front of her is a *lightweight* implication of the proposition that there is a dog in front of her. Therefore, again, if E=K 1 is true then closure fails miserably.

Any theory that implies the miserable failure of closure must face a further embarrassment. We can illustrate the embarrassment with *Sheep*. If the subject is not justified in believing that there is a sheep in the field, then what is the attitude that the subject is justified in taking towards that proposition, once he considers it? Should he disbelieve it? Should he suspend judgment? Both options seem unpalatable. Similarly, what attitude is Terry justified in taking towards the proposition that there is an animal in front of her? Again, both disbelief and suspension of judgment are unpalatable. The only justified attitude is for the subject to believe that there is a sheep in the field and for Terry to believe that there is an animal in front of her, but this option is incompatible with E=K 1.

5 Conclusion

We have argued that if E=K 1 is true, then there are no Gettier cases and closure fails miserably. These results are unacceptable. We conclude that evidence isn't

knowledge.¹³

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