

Williamson on the Distinction between the A Priori and the A Posteriori Once Again¹

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1. The Initial Challenge

In his ‘How Deep is the Distinction between A Priori and A Posteriori Knowledge?’ (2013; reprinted as Chapter 8 of this volume), and en route to his central argument, Williamson develops a challenge for any top-down characterization of the distinction between a priori and a posteriori justification. The challenge turns on a dilemma about how to characterize the notion of ‘experience’ as it figures in the phrase ‘justification that is independent of experience’. According to Williamson’s original argument, one could opt either to construe ‘experience’ as ‘outer experience’ or as ‘inner experience’, with an alleged problem emerging either way.

In my reply (Chapter 9 of this volume), I criticized Williamson’s argument on the grounds that the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience is not well-defined and so cannot do the work he was putting it to. Williamson seems to accept this criticism, but claims that an argument to the same effect can be reformulated without it.

Naturally, I agree, since I offered such a reformulation myself. On my reformulation, the problem turns on how we construe the *justifiers* of our beliefs. In particular, it turns on whether we construe those justifiers as consisting in *propositions*, on the one hand, or in *mental states* that have those propositions as their contents, on the other.

I argued that the friend of the a priori cannot accept the view, increasingly influential within epistemology, that the justifiers of our beliefs are propositions. For if the justifiers are propositions, then perceptual experiences can at most have an *enabling* role in empirical belief, giving us *access* to the propositions that do the justifying, rather than occasionally serving as the justifiers themselves. However, in order to have a viable distinction between a priori and a posteriori justification, we need a robust distinction between experience having a merely *enabling* role and its having an *epistemic* role. Thus, we see that a proponent of the distinction cannot endorse the justifiers as propositions view.²

The picture that I end up tentatively endorsing, then, is this: Justifiers are mental states. A belief is a posteriori justified when it is justified by sensory experience, introspection, or a substantive use of memory; it is a priori justified when it is justified by intuition, the understanding, empirically unconstrained uses of the imagination, or reflection. When a belief is justified by a particular mental state, I also say that it is its epistemic basis, and that it 'epistemically depends' on that state.

In the piece to which this is a reply (Chapter 10 of this volume), Williamson attempts a reformulation of his argument against the feasibility of a top-down characterization of the a priori–a posteriori distinction.

At the heart of his new argument is an example. We are to imagine Mathematician examining the proof of a new mathematical theorem authored by someone else, Author. Mathematician goes through the proof, understands it, and is convinced by it. In this way, he comes to have seemingly a priori justified belief in the theorem that it proves. Williamson's aim is to show that, in this case, sense perception plays an irreducibly epistemic role for Mathematician's knowledge, thus jeopardizing the intuitive a priori status of the knowledge that he arrives at. Thus, my characterization of the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori is shown not to line up with the bottom-up examples, just as Williamson had originally claimed.

Two stipulations are essential to the functioning of the example. First, Mathematician is not 'working out the proof for himself', he is just 'lazily' following the proof as it is written. This stipulation is essential to making it seem plausible that Mathematician's knowledge of the theorem epistemically depends on his visual perception of the written lines of the proof. Second, he doesn't simply accept the proof because he *defers* to the author; indeed, initially, he distrusts her. This stipulation is essential if we are to dispel the idea that all that's going on here is *testimonial* knowledge, which would naturally be classified as a posteriori knowledge.

The crucial step in the example comes in the following passage:

Consider the point in reading the proof when he comes to a step of modus ponens, from 'A' and 'If A, B' to 'B'. He already has knowledge and justified belief that A and that if A, B. He visually recognizes what he sees written in front of him as an instance of modus ponens, and—being a competent logician—consequently acquires knowledge and justified belief that B. He has a visual impression as of there being a written instance of modus ponens in front of him. If he lacked that impression, he would not be justified in believing that B. Of course, a brilliant mathematician could start ignoring their visual impressions and just work out the proof for themselves, but that is not what our uncreative mathematician is doing. He is just following the proof in front of him; it was not salient to him before being pointed out in the proof that the premises for a step of modus ponens were available. *His* justification in Boghossian's sense for believing that B is irreducibly dependent on his having a visual impression as of there being an instance of modus ponens in front of him. Moreover, the dependence seems to be epistemic by Boghossian's standards, for if visual impressions are justifiers in the way he suggests, the mathematician's visual impression is part of what justifies his belief that B, rather than a mere precondition of what justifies, since it is integral to his recognition of the step's validity.

(Chapter 10, p. 159)

I have to confess to not really getting how this is supposed to work. If I read a proof by an author I distrust, I would check the steps to make sure that they are sound; otherwise, I would just read the proof deferentially, trusting it to be sound. Even in

the latter case, a certain amount of thinking the proof through for oneself is presumably required to read the proof with ‘understanding’.

Now, if I am justified in believing ‘A’ and ‘If A, B’, and I am a competent logician, I recognize immediately that I am justified in believing ‘B’; I don’t need to see that Author has written ‘B’ in the next line of the proof. Even if I don’t deduce it myself, and read on to the next line and see it to be a ‘B’, I would check briefly to see that it does indeed follow from what came before, even if I am reading in a ‘lazy’, but non-deferential way (as I remarked above).

So, I simply don’t see why Williamson says, “[Mathematician’s] justification . . . for believing that B is irreducibly dependent on his having a visual impression as of there being an instance of modus ponens in front of him.” I’m not seeing why Williamson thinks his argument has any prospect of succeeding.

Let us step back a bit and ask, When you get knowledge, or justified belief, on the basis of a proof, how many epistemically important possibilities are there?

One possibility, of course, is that you accept the proof *on authority*. You cannot yourself properly assess either whether each and every one of the premises is a good starting point, or whether each and every one of the steps of the proof is valid; at some point in reading through the proof, you will need to accept *something* on authority. On this scenario, at the end of reading through the proof, you would know the theorem partly by testimony, and so you would know it a posteriori (*pace* Burge (1993) and in agreement with Malmgren (2006)).

Another possibility is that you work out the proof for yourself, in more or less detail, seeing both how each one of the premises is true, and how each one of the steps is valid. This needn’t involve replicating the proof in gory detail, but just in having a rough sense of how the steps could be validated if necessary. In such a case, barring a skepticism about the very possibility of a priori knowledge, you would know the theorem a priori.

What Williamson is after is some case intermediate between these two possibilities, in which you don’t accept *any* element of the proof on authority, but nor do you work it out for yourself. And in this sort of case, he thinks, you will get a disconnect between the natural classification of the case as a priori and the irreducible epistemic role for sensory experience.

Unfortunately, he hasn’t shown us that there is such an intermediate case and so, not shown that there is a recipe here for generating a problem for top-down characterizations of the enabling–justifying distinction.

2. The Central Argument

Let me turn now to a discussion of Williamson’s reply to my critique of his central argument. Williamson’s reply to me is vitiated by some fairly serious misunderstanding of what I said.

Williamson’s central argument, in his original paper, was designed to show that the distinction between a priori and a posteriori justification is a shallow one, of no clear interest in epistemology. As I explained in my critique, he proposes to demonstrate his conclusion by presenting a pair of examples with the following features:

- (A) One of them is a clear case of someone's justifiably believing a proposition in an a priori way, namely:
 - (1) All crimson things are red
- (B) The other is a clear case of someone's justifiably believing another proposition in an a posteriori way, namely:
 - (2) All recent volumes of *Who's Who* are red;
- (C) The ways of justifiably believing involved in the examples are *broadly representative* of the ways in which propositions are justifiably believed a priori and a posteriori, respectively; and, finally,
- (D) There is no epistemologically interesting difference between the two ways of believing specified; they are both known on the basis of similar exercises of the imagination.

I admitted that, had Williamson succeeded in presenting a pair of examples with all these features, he would have succeeded in his ambitious aim. I argued, however, that (A), (B), and (C) are, in fact, all false.

Williamson doesn't come close to countering my claim that (C) is false (although that he doesn't come close to doing so may not have been apparent to him; see below). However, (C) is central to his case: if the way of knowing (1) or (2) that he describes is unusual, we could bracket it off as a borderline case that poses no interesting problem for a clear-enough distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori.

Williamson argues at some length that there is no alternative to his imagination-based account of (1); and he then has this to say about our knowledge of (2):

The point of taking the cases in that order was to start with a paradigm case of a priori knowledge, which friends of the epistemological distinction reject only on pain of endangering the distinction itself. Since Norman can in principle be as well off epistemologically in respect of (2) as he is in respect of (1), in the ways I describe, it is unprincipled for friends of the distinction to concede his knowledge of (1) but deny his knowledge of (2).

(Chapter 10, p. 166)

Even if I were to concede Williamson's imagination-based account of our knowledge of (1); and concede that it is a representative way in which knowledge of a priori knowable propositions is often achieved; and also concede that this implied that anyone coming to believe (2) in structurally analogous ways would come to know (2); it would *still* not follow that this imagination-based account of knowing (2) was a way in which empirical, a posteriori propositions are *typically* known. For all that would have been conceded, acts of imagination could be, and indeed look to be, very *unusual* ways in which anyone would try to come to know empirical propositions like (2). So, Williamson has done nothing to counter the obvious falsity of (C).

Let us turn to (B). Much of my critique of Williamson's original paper centered on disputing (B)—that is, on arguing that his imagination-based account of (2) could not result in knowledge or justified belief in (2). I subsequently used that argument to argue, by structural analogy, that his imagination-based account could also not account for our knowledge of (1).

Williamson claims that I loaded the decks against him by reversing the order of exposition. He thinks it's important to start with (1). The reasoning seems to be this: There is no real alternative to his imagination-based account of (1). He then says:

Consequently, the structural analogy in reverse undermines Boghossian's claim that Norman could know (2) by imagination only if he already knows, or has justification for, something like (2a) and (2b). (Chapter 10, p. 166)

((2a) and (2b) are background knowledge conditions that would spoil Williamson's argument.)

Several points need to be made.

First, it really can't matter in which order one considers the examples. If the proffered accounts work for both (1) and (2), they should work separately and individually, in whatever order they are discussed.

Second, I spent most of my time looking at Williamson's discussion of (2) because his claim that someone could come to know an empirical proposition such as (2) through the exercise of a single act of the imagination is the most striking claim of his paper; and it deserved a thorough examination. That examination reveals a quite general structural problem with his account, one that arises whenever a single act of the imagination is claimed to ground our knowledge of a universal generalization. The structural flaw is that, *if the imagination is to succeed in delivering knowledge of the generalization at all*, it needs to be backed up by background knowledge of propositions such as (2a) and (2b). Call this the Background-Backed Knowledge by Imagination (BBKI) account.

Third, Williamson spends much of his paper criticizing the BBKI account of (1) and, as he takes it, by analogy, of (2). He does this because he assumes two things: first, that I have to provide *some account or other* of how we know propositions like (1), and second, that the BBKI account is my best shot at providing such an account. In both of these assumptions, Williamson is very much mistaken.

To begin with the second, I believe I made it amply clear that I was not for a second endorsing the BBKI. Recall: I was looking at Williamson's knowledge by imagination account in the context of our knowledge of (2), an empirical proposition that we have zero prospect of knowing by an act of the imagination, let alone a single such act. The point of the exercise was not to *improve* on Williamson's account, but rather to show that his account was hopeless; that if it were to have any prospect of succeeding it would have to be modified in the ways I indicated; and that, when this was done, (i) it would show that it was not imagination, but rather *recollection*, that was doing the epistemic work; and, hence, (ii) that his central argument against the depth of the a priori–a posteriori distinction fails completely. I believe all of this is made perfectly clear in the following passage from my paper:

Well, under what conditions *would* Norman be able to use his imagining of a single taxi to generate a justified belief about the color that all London taxis have?

It is entirely unclear to me that there are *any* conditions under which Norman would be able to do this. At a minimum, it seems to me, he must have reason to believe (a) that the taxis have a dominant color, and (b) that the taxi he imagines is appropriately representative of that dominant color.

But how could Norman possibly satisfy these two conditions without being able to *recall* what the dominant color of London taxis is? How could he know that there *is* a single color that London taxis tend to have and that *this* color is appropriately representative of what that color is, without actually being able to recall that color?

Williamson seems to think that it is enough to scotch the suggestion that Norman is *recalling*, as opposed to imagining, to stipulate that no feats of recalling particular experiences or events is involved in his description of Norman's way of coming to know (2).

But not all acts of recall need involve the recall of a particular experience or event. To advert to our earlier discussion of preservative memory, just as we may recall propositions without remembering specific events in which we learned those propositions, so we may recall generic facts about how an F looks, without recalling the look of any particular encountered F.

Having seen many London taxis, Norman may be able to recall what a London taxi looks like, without recalling any particular London taxi. He calls up a stored generic image. Having seen many frogs, Norman may be able to recall what a frog looks like, without recalling any particular frog that he has encountered. He calls up a stored generic image.

And the point is that, unless that is what is in fact going on in Norman's 'imagining' of a recent volume of *Who's Who*—unless what he's actually doing is recalling a stored generic image of a recent volume of *Who's Who*, under roughly that description—he cannot have arrived at a justified belief about all recent volumes of *Who's Who*.

I conclude that Williamson's argument's reliance on (B) leaves it open to serious doubt: Norman could not have come to know (2) in the way that it claims.

(Chapter 9, pp. 151–2)

Mutatis mutandis for (1).

I conjecture that part of what made Williamson overlook these emphatically clear passages is his first assumption, that I *must* be offering *some* account or other of how we typically know (1). Since the BBKI seemed to be the only account on the table, he assumed that it must be the one. As he puts it,

Since Boghossian denies that one can acquire a priori knowledge in the way I describe, he needs to describe an alternative way of acquiring a priori knowledge (or justified belief) about colour relations, on pain of having to abandon what are meant to be some of the best cases of a priori knowledge (or justified belief). (Chapter 10, p. 161)

However, I was not at all trying to offer any positive account of how we know (1) a priori. All I was trying to do was show that Williamson had not succeeded in casting doubt on the depth of the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori, and so had not succeeded in establishing the main claim of his paper.

And, of course, it's not true that unless I describe some alternative way of acquiring a priori justified belief about color relations, I would have to abandon what are meant to be some of the best cases of a priori knowledge. If I had been trying to describe an alternative route to our knowledge of (1), it would surely have been perverse of me to spend all my time on our knowledge of (2), with barely a word about our knowledge of (1). Indeed, I said right at the start of the paper that, although we have every right to be confident that the a priori–a posteriori distinction is real, we are still very much in the dark about how feats of a priori knowledge are accomplished.

There is an interesting meta-philosophical issue behind this particular dustup. Williamson seems to think that, for the friend of the a priori, it's time to put up or shut up. Either say how we manage to know things a priori, or admit that there may not be much at all that's distinctive about the notion.

My reaction to this is to ask, Why this impatience? Why now?

I conjecture that the real culprit in Williamson's eyes is not the a priori per se, but, rather, as we have often had occasion to see in these exchanges, an internalist conception of justification.

Williamson's opposition to internalism is well known and one of his insights is that it will be hard to make much of the a priori–a posteriori distinction on externalist, especially Reliabilist, views of justification. Thus, if epistemology is to be made safe for externalism, it would be useful to show that, independently of externalist/Reliabilist assumptions, there isn't much to the a priori–a posteriori distinction to begin with.

Unfortunately for Williamson's campaign, his argument doesn't work—certainly not without a doctrinaire Reliabilism about justification being presupposed; and, arguably, not even with it.³

Notes

1. This reply is published for the first time here.
2. This is a bit quick in the retelling. For further details, see the original presentation of the argument in Chapter 9.
3. For helpful comments on an earlier version I am grateful to Crispin Wright and Christopher Peacocke.