

EPISTEMOLOGY OF COUNTERFACTUALS AND EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Williamson offers an imagination-based account of knowledge of counterfactuals, according to which sense experience plays a role that is neither evidential nor merely enabling. This involves the idea that, in coming to know a counterfactual conditional, *S* visually imagines its antecedent, i.e. supposes the antecedent, and goes on to develop the supposition by an offline imaginative or predictive mechanism that exploits all the background information consisting in *S*'s past experiences of how the actual world behaves; and if such a development leads *S* to add its consequent, then *S* is said to know the counterfactual. Thus, Williamson introduces an interesting epistemic role for sense experience that is not evidential and then goes on to claim that our knowledge of counterfactuals can be classified neither as *a priori* nor *a posteriori*. But if this is the case, then the traditional *a priori/a posteriori* dichotomy must be moved from its central place in epistemology. In what follows I will argue that Williamson is mistaken in thinking that the role of sense experience in our knowledge of counterfactuals does not survive as part of our total evidence. If this is true, then Williamson's epistemology of counterfactuals leaves the traditional *a priori/a posteriori* distinction unmoved. My purpose here is to argue why it is the case.

Keywords: Williamson, counterfactual knowledge, imagination, philosophy of philosophy, experience, *a priori / a posteriori* distinction.

(Karşılgusal Durumların Epistemolojisi ve Deneyim)

ÖZET

Williamson, herhangi bir *a priori* metod gerektirmeyen bir masabaşı bilgisi epistemolojisi önerir. Ona göre felsefi bilgiye, kavramları ustaca uygulayabilen imgelem mekanizmasının çevrimdışı kullanımı kaynaklık eder. Deneyimin buradaki rolü, ne delil sağlamak ne de kavramların sırf idrak edilmesinden ibaret olup, karşılgusal veya modal önermelerin bilgisine bakıldığı zaman bu açıkça görülebilir. Duyu deneyimleri, algının çevrimiçi bir şekilde işlediğini çevrimdışı değerlendirebilen imgelem yetimizin "bileylenmesini" ya da "biçimlendirilmesini" sağlar. Demek ki eldeki bir karşılgusalın bilinmesinde, özne *S* başlangıçta onun ön bileşeni varsayar ve daha sonra bu varsayımını imgelem mekanizmasını çevrimdışı kullanmak suretiyle geliştirmeye koyulur. Eğer bu işlem *S*'nin bu karşılgusalın art-bileşenini onun ön-bileşenine eklemesine fırsat tanırsa, o zaman *S*'nin bu karşılgusal önermeyi bildiği söylenebilir. Fakat deneyimin buradaki işlevi onun yukarıda ifade edilen iki rolünden de tamamen farklı olduğu için, *S*'nin bilgisi ne *a priori* ne de *a posteriori*dir. Ama eğer bu doğruysa, o zaman geleneksel *a priori / a posteriori* ayrımı epistemolojideki merkezi yerinden sökülüp atılmalıdır. Bu makalede, karşılgusal önermelerin bilgisine deneyin delilsel olarak kaynaklık etmediği savının aslında doğru olmadığı gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. Duyu deneyimlerinin bilgiye kaynaklık etmedeki rolünün sadece deneysel deliller sağlama işleviyle sınırlandırılması, kavramların ustaca uygulanması için deneyin sağladığı katkının delilsel olmadığı anlamına gelmez. Bu çalışmanın amacı bunu temellendirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Williamson, deneyim, imgelem, karşılgusal bilgi, felsefe felsefesi, *a priori / a posteriori* ayrımı.

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I. Introduction

In *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Timothy Williamson (2007a) provides us with an epistemology of armchair knowledge that requires no *a priori* method at all. To explain the possibility of such knowledge, he critically reflects on the methodology and subject matter of philosophy and argues that philosophical inquiry involves neither a special methodology nor a distinctive domain of truths. According to the picture he lays out, since philosophy is much less different than other areas of inquiry including natural sciences, answering philosophical questions requires no special faculty of rational intuition. Also, the mere possession of concepts or our linguistic competence is not a source of armchair knowledge: our notion of analyticity does no explanatory work in epistemological theorizing. Rather, philosophical knowledge derives from an *offline* employment of our ordinary cognitive faculties that involves skills in applying concepts. However, the only role that experience can play here consists in *honing* such cognitive skills by which armchair knowledge is secured. For Williamson, modal claims can be used to illustrate this. Moreover, he suggests that modal knowledge is a “special case” of counterfactual knowledge: our cognitive skills that enable us to know counterfactual conditionals also enable us to know modal propositions.¹ But what exactly is our epistemic access to counterfactuals?

Williamson offers an imagination-based account of knowledge of counterfactuals, according to which sense experience plays a role that is neither evidential nor merely enabling. This involves the idea that, in coming to know a counterfactual conditional, *S* visually imagines its antecedent, i.e. supposes the antecedent, and goes on to develop the supposition by an offline imaginative or predictive mechanism that exploits all the background information consisting in *S*'s past experiences of how the actual world behaves; and if such a development leads *S* to add its consequent, then *S* is said to know the counterfactual. That is, *S*'s knowledge that (CF) if the bush had not been there, the rock would have ended up in the lake depends on past experience for the skillful offline application of the concepts involved in (CF) but not for experiential evidence. Thus, Williamson introduces an interesting epistemic role for sense experience that is not evidential and then goes on to claim that *S*'s knowledge that (CF) cannot be classified either as *a priori* or *a posteriori*. But if this is the case, then the traditional *a priori/a posteriori* dichotomy must be moved from its central place in epistemology.²

In what follows I will argue that Williamson is mistaken in thinking that the role of sense experience in our knowledge of counterfactuals does not survive as part of our total evidence. Here my main contention is that

¹ See also Williamson (2005, 2007b) for further discussion of the claim that the epistemology of metaphysical modality is case of epistemology of counterfactuals. Recent criticisms of Williamson's account include Jenkins (2008), Vaidya (2010), Roca-Royes (2011), Peacocke (2011), Lowe (2012) and Kroedel (2012).

² See Jenkins (2008: 693-4), Boghossian (2011: 489-490) and Tahko (2012: 95-100) for a similar presentation of Williamson's account of knowledge of counterfactuals.

restricting the epistemically relevant justificatory role of experience to experiential evidence does not entail that the experiences necessary to skillfully apply the relevant concepts are not evidential. If this is the case, then Williamson's epistemology of counterfactuals leaves the traditional *a priori/a posteriori* distinction unmoved. My purpose here is to argue why it is the case. First, let us focus on Williamson's account of knowledge counterfactuals, with a special attention to the role of experience.

II. Williamson's Theory of Counterfactual Knowledge

Williamson claims that the *a priori / a posteriori* distinction should be replaced by a distinction between armchair and non-armchair knowledge. To establish this, he assumes, perhaps following Locke, that the former is based on distinguishing two roles that experience plays in knowledge acquisition. Experience plays an evidential role in coming to know that this car is red; but only an enabling role in knowing that red cars are colored.³ But, for Williamson, there are many cases of knowledge in which the role of experience is neither evidential nor enabling. He suggests that our knowledge of counterfactuals is a case in point. The role played by experience in counterfactual knowledge is not evidential; nor is it merely enabling; in coming to know a counterfactual conditional, experience does something in between these two roles. What role does experience play in our knowledge of counterfactuals? Williamson suggests that his account of the epistemology of counterfactuals will provide the answer. According to this account, knowledge of counterfactuals is achieved by using our faculty of imagination offline in the following way:

One supposes the antecedent and develops the supposition, adding further judgments within the supposition by reasoning, offline predictive mechanisms, and other offline judgements.... All of one's background knowledge and beliefs are available from within the scope of the supposition as a description of one's actual circumstances for the purposes of comparison with the counterfactual circumstances.... To a first approximation: one asserts the counterfactual conditional if and only if the development eventually leads on to add the consequent. (Williamson 2007a: 152-3)

For example:

You are in the mountains. As the sun melts the ice, rocks embedded in it are loosened and crash down the slope. You notice one rock slide into a bush. You wonder where it would have ended if the bush had not been there. A natural way to answer this question is by visualizing the rock sliding without the bush there,

³ Its enabling role here is this: experience is necessary to acquire the concepts forming the proposition that red cars are colored.

and then bouncing down the slope into the lake at the bottom. Under suitable background conditions, you thereby come to know this counterfactual: (CF) if the bush had not been there, the rock would have ended in the lake. (Williamson 2007a: 142)

As Boghossian (2011: 490) also points out, this description of our actual procedures for evaluating counterfactuals leaves many fundamental questions concerning the nature of both imagination and counterfactual conditionals unanswered, such as Goodman's problem cotenability. Owing to limitations of spacetime, my discussion will only be restricted to the role of experience in counterfactual knowledge.

Williamson proposes (2007b: 111) that in our imagination-based account of knowledge of counterfactuals, "experience can play a role that is neither strictly evidential nor purely enabling. For it can mould the ways in which we later imagine and judge, beyond what is needed to grasp the relevant concepts, without surviving as part of our total evidence." What Williamson has in mind here is that experience plays a crucial role in *honing* our ability to evaluate offline in the imagination sentences that we can evaluate online in perception. More specifically, the role experience plays in counterfactual knowledge is that it epistemically grounds, not just simply supply, the relevant concepts, which is meant to say that experience is needed for the skillful application of concepts. To explain what this role is supposed to be like and how it differs from its evidential and enabling roles, Williamson (2007a: 166) offers the following example-specific considerations:

134

I know *a posteriori* that two marks in front of me are at most two inches apart. Now I deploy the same faculty offline to make a counterfactual judgment: (25) if two marks had been nine inches apart, they would have been at least nineteen centimeters apart. In judging (25), ... I visually imagine two marks nine inches apart, and use my ability to judge distances in centimeters visually offline to judge under the counterfactual supposition that they are at least nineteen centimeters apart.... Thus I know (25).

Appealing to a reliabilist criterion for knowledge, he says that since our imagination is a reliable belief forming process, (25) qualifies as a case of knowledge. However, according to Williamson, experience plays no evidential role in (25) at all, because

I do not consciously or unconsciously recall memories of distances encountered in perception, nor do I deduce (25) from general principles I have inductively or abductively gathered from experience.⁴

⁴ Yet knowledge of (25) is not *a priori*, because the contribution of experience in this case is far more than enabling.

Moreover, experience does not also play a purely enabling role in this case since experiences needed to evaluate (25) go far beyond the experiences needed to form the concepts involved in (25).

The causal role of past sense experience in my judgment of (25) far exceeds enabling me to grasp the concepts relevant to (25).⁵

But the role of sense experience is, in Williamson's terms, as follows:

I know (25) only if my offline application of the concepts of an inch and a centimeter was sufficiently skillful. Whether I am justified in believing (25) likewise depends on how skillful I am in making such judgments. My possession of appropriate skills depends constitutively, not just causally, on past experience for the calibration of my judgments of length in those units.⁶

A third role assigned to experience here is this: experience is needed for the skillful application of concepts. As it stands, this seems to be an important insight. For it suggests that supplying evidence is not the only epistemically relevant role that experience can play in knowledge acquisition: in addition to its evidential and enabling roles, experience plays a third role in honing our ordinary cognitive abilities that involve skills in applying concepts. Now this would indeed be quite significant for epistemology if there were such a third role for experience; because, it would have the alarming consequence, among other things, that the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction is "too crude to be of much epistemological use." In particular, it seems that if the third role for experience is really distinctive in the sense that it is not reducible to its evidential role, then the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction will be out of place when analyzing the epistemic status of (25). But this, I think, depends on whether the envisaged third role is really distinctive. So the question that needs to be addressed here is this: is the third role for experience that Williamson describes reducible to its evidential role? I think that it is. Here is why?

III. The Role of Experience in Counterfactual Knowledge

It may perhaps be the case that we come to know counterfactuals by using our imagination offline that involves skills in applying concepts,

⁵ But, on Williamson's view, this does not mean that knowledge of (25) is *a posteriori*. If we classify it as a case of *a posteriori* knowledge, then we will also have to classify knowledge of modal truths as *a posteriori*. However, there are many instances of knowledge of philosophically significant modal truths which are clearly not *a posteriori*.

⁶ Boghossian (2011: 490) rightly criticizes this epistemology for counterfactuals by saying that "it relies on several only dimly understood notions, such as that of the "offline" application of a cognitive faculty. It is steeped in psychological speculation.... And it seems to depend on a controversial (and to me, implausible) reliabilist criterion for knowledge."

and so it may be that experience is necessary for applying the relevant concepts skillfully. But why is it the case that our skillful application of concepts, though depends on experience, does not amount to the provision of experiential justification? Williamson supposes that, when using our imagination offline to evaluate a given counterfactual, while these perceptually honed cognitive skills are kept alive, the corresponding pieces of experiential evidence somehow cease to exist. Williamson's account of counterfactual knowledge relies mainly on this assumption. But he has failed to substantiate it.⁷

Also, Williamson's case for the distinctiveness of the envisaged third role is built on inconsistency. In saying that "nor do I deduce (25) from general principles I have inductively or abductively gathered from experience", he actually commits to the position that *a posteriori* justification comes only from inductive or abductive inferences from perceptual evidence. But this is unduly restrictive and inconsistent with his account of counterfactual knowledge, since it implies that epistemic justification is exclusively a matter of one's evidence. As stated, his account of counterfactual knowledge allows, however, that one is justified in believing that *p* only if one skillfully applies the concepts in *p*; and this is equivalent to saying that justified belief is not exclusively a matter of one's evidence. Besides, since the traditional conception of *a posteriori* is theory neutral, it does not suggest that *a posteriori* justification consists exclusively of inductive or abductive inferences from perceptual evidence; nor does it even entail that epistemic justification is solely a function of one's evidence. This means that the traditional conception of *a posteriori* is, contrary to Williamson's opinion, indeed compatible with his epistemology of counterfactuals. The latter is also consistent with the traditional conception of *a priori*, because it neither suggests nor entails that the evidential role of experience consists only of experiential evidence.⁸ So, Williamson's position that the third role involving the skillful application of concepts is not evidential is incoherent, an incoherency that originates in stating the *a priori* / *a posteriori* dichotomy only in terms of the evidential role that experience may have in knowledge acquisition.

It is, I think, a mistake to consider the role of sense experience in knowledge of counterfactuals as non-evidential. For, restricting the evidential role of experience to experiential evidence does not entail that the experiences necessary to skillfully apply the relevant concepts are not evidential. We can accept that a given counterfactual claim can depend on experience for the skillful application of concepts, but the thing that it is not some experiential evidence defined as propositions known but the skillful

⁷ This critique of Williamson's epistemology for counterfactuals is on similar lines as Jenkins'. In Jenkins' (2008: 700) terms, "why is he [Williamson] so sure that the envisaged empirical 'moulding' of the habits which guide our counterfactual thinking does not simply amount the provision of empirical evidence for those counterfactuals? Perhaps because he thinks of evidence as propositional, and thinks that one can gain and keep these empirically honed conceptual skills despite loss of the corresponding pieces of empirical knowledge, or failure ever to have gained them. But this needs argument. For those who conceive of evidence differently, things may be even trickier."

⁸ See Albert Casullo (2012: 310-318) for a similar objection to Williamson's view.

application of concepts that justifies the counterfactual does not simply make this form of epistemic dependence on experience non-evidential. In order for the latter not to count as evidential, it must be the case that experiential justification consists exclusively of some inductive or abductive inferences from perceptual data. But why restrict it thus, and on what grounds?

Inasmuch as the skillful application of concepts based on past experience is a necessary condition on justified belief, our perceptually molded conceptual skills also amount to the provision of empirical evidence just like the ones inductively or abductively gathered from experience. Our imagination, like our senses, is informed and disciplined by experience so that it constrains our imagination to avoid irrelevant counterfactual scenarios. This is perhaps why we take our senses to be an online source of experiential justification. So we may here draw a parallel between perception and imagination. What perception contributes to imagination is quite similar to what it actually contributes to senses; and this constitutes a good reason for thinking that our perceptually honed cognitive skills are also, though offline, sources of experiential justification. In saying that “I deploy the same faculty offline to make a counterfactual judgment”, Williamson himself seems to concede to this point. Given that by “the same faculty” he has in mind perception, we may even say that our imagination actually consists of nothing but an offline deployment of our faculty of perception. Furthermore, if imagination gets its reliability from experience and if we think of the reliability of our cognitive skills as evidentially relevant, then there is really nothing that prevents them from counting as evidential.

So, if one can skillfully apply the concepts involved in a given counterfactual and if one’s imaginative ability to do so depends constitutively on her experiences past, then sense experience’s contribution to one’s knowledge of counterfactuals is clearly evidential. This is because both developing the antecedent and adding the consequent are based evidentially on certain memories of having visually encountered similar situations in the past. To see this, let us consider Williamson’s mountain example in more detail.

While wondering in the mountains I just see one rock slide into a bush. Since I am wondering, I begin to wonder how the rock would behave in nearby possible worlds where the bush is absent. I claim to know that (CF) if the bush had not been there, the rock would have ended up in the lake. How do I know this counterfactual? I come to know (CF), thanks to Williamson, by first visually imagining the movement of the rock in the absence of the bush; and then I try to develop it, i.e. try to accurately predict the behaviour of the rock in such a physically or metaphysically possible scenario, by using again my perceptually honed faculty of imagination offline. If such a development leads me to add that the rock is going to end up in the lake— that is, if my offline application of the concepts of a sliding rock and a slope is sufficiently skillful— then I know (CF).

Now, even if we are to accept this description as correct and even if it is the case that what justifies or grounds (CF) is the skillful application of

the concepts that depends on past experience, the role of experience in knowing (CF) is still clearly evidential. For, no matter how well our imagination is perceptually “honed” or “molded”, it can yet come up with the wildest scenarios possible. But, in order for my imagination to proceed as “realistically” as it can, it must exploit some background knowledge and constitutive facts. As Tahko (2012: 93) clearly points out, “[t]heir [background knowledge and constitutive facts] key role is to restrict our imagination to rule out irrelevant counterfactual suppositions.” That is, both in supposing the antecedent to be true and successfully predicting that the rock is going to end up in the lake, my imagination can utilize all my background knowledge “based strictly on our knowledge of the actual world.”⁹ So, if I am to avoid the cases where the antecedent of (CF) is physically or metaphysically impossible, the background knowledge that my imagination needs to utilize should consist of certain memories of having visually encountered similar slopes without bushes in the past. How else can I get to visually imagine the movement of the rock in the absence of the bush?

To conclude, when I use my imagination *offline* to accurately predict the behaviour of the rock in the absence of the bush— that is, to skillfully judge that the rock would have ended up in the lake— I need to recall memories of how rocks generally behave in similar circumstances encountered in perceptual experience. Since my imaginative ability to do so is based on my past experiences in this way, sense experience’s contribution to my knowledge of (CF) is nothing other than being evidential. Therefore, knowledge of (CF) is clearly *a posteriori*.¹⁰ So my conclusion is that since

⁹ See Tahko (2012: 100-107) for a detailed discussion of this issue. Tahko’s main objection is that “certain elements of the epistemology of counterfactuals that he [Williamson] discusses, namely so called background knowledge and constitutive facts, are already saturated with modal content which his account fails to explain.” According to Tahko (2012: 93), “background knowledge turns out to be problematic in cases where we are dealing with metaphysically possible counterfactual suppositions that violate the actual laws of physics.... [U]nless Williamson assumes that background knowledge corresponds with the actual, true laws of physics and that these laws are metaphysically necessary, it will be difficult to address this problem. Furthermore, Williamson’s account fails to accommodate the distinction between conceivable yet metaphysically impossible scenarios, and conceivable and metaphysically possible scenarios. This is because background knowledge and constitutive facts are based strictly on our knowledge of the actual world.”

¹⁰ Williamson (2007a: 169) maintains, however, that if we classify (CF) as a case of *a posteriori* knowledge, then knowledge of many significant modal truths, such as the proposition that (MT) “it is necessary that whoever knows something believes it”, will also be classified as *a posteriori*. But, for Williamson, (MT) cannot be properly classified as *a posteriori*, because “the experiences through which we learned to distinguish in practice between belief and non-belief and between knowledge and ignorance play no strictly evidential role....” Knowledge of (MT) can’t also be properly classified as *a priori*, since the role of experience in this case is more than purely enabling. I agree with Williamson that knowledge of (MT) is not *a posteriori*, but this does not mean that (CF) is also not *a posteriori*. As Jenkins (2008: 695-698) has convincingly argued, Williamson has not given us any good reason to think that modal epistemology can really be reduced to counterfactual epistemology. So it is not clear that Knowledge of (MT) is a “special case” of knowledge of (CF). It is also unclear whether or not the role of experience in knowledge

Fatih ÖZTÜRK

experience also plays an evidential role in my knowledge of (CF), Williamson's counterfactual epistemology fails to demote the *a priori* / *a posteriori* knowledge distinction from its central place in epistemology.

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