WILLIAMSON ON SCEPTICISM AND RATIONALITY

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We are often in no position to know whether *p* is true but, it is widely held, where we do know that *p*, we are always in a position to know that we know that *p*: knowledge is *luminous*. In Chapter 4 of *Knowledge and Its Limits* Williamson argues that knowledge is not luminous and with this conclusion in hand he hopes to see off the sceptic, amongst other things.

I

Consider a scalar quantity like height. You can know by sight that the tree before you is neither 6 inches nor 6000 inches tall. But, due to limited visual acuity, you can't know by sight that the tree is not 665 inches tall (it is in fact 666 inches tall). Furthermore, you know that you can't know this sort of thing, that is to say you know that if the tree is 666 inches tall, you can't know by sight that it is not 665 inches tall. In general, you know that if the tree is $n + 1$ inches tall then you can't know by sight that it is not n inches tall (call this claim X). Now assume (for *reductio*) that one knows that the tree is not n inches tall only if one also knows that one knows that the tree is not n inches tall (call this claim Y). It is agreed that you know by sight that the tree is not 6 inches tall. By Y, you must know that you know the tree is not 6 inches tall. By X, you can infer from this (and thereby know) that the tree is not 7 inches tall. And so, by iterated application of X and Y you can arrive at the false conclusion that you know the tree is not 666 inches tall.

Given the plausibility of claim X, Williamson maintains that the only acceptable escape route here is to deny Y, the claim that for every n, you know that the tree is not n inches tall only if you know that you know this. There is some region (perhaps around 600 inches) where you know by sight that the tree is not that height without knowing that you know this. This conclusion can be generalised to cover our knowledge of any scalar quantity whether it be physical or phenomenal. All that is required is that

> the possible answers lie on a scale which can be divided so finely that if a given answer is in fact correct then one does not know that its neighbouring answers are not correct, and one can know that one's powers of discrimination have that limit. (p. 119)

Williamson has convinced me that in (what I shall call) the *scalar* cases one can have knowledge without being in a position to know that one has it. 'Being in a position to know' something means that you would know it in so far as you were reasonable, attended to the matter, had the relevant concepts

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and so forth (p. 170). The point about the scalar cases is that the subject remains ignorant of what he knows even though he is perfectly reasonable, attends to the matter. . . . No failure of rationality is involved in such ignorance. I shall accept this conclusion. How does it bear on scepticism?

Williamson's sceptic compares a good case with a bad one:

> In the good case, things appear generally as they ordinarily do, and are that way; one believes some proposition p (for example, that one has hands), and p is true; by ordinary standards, one knows p. In the bad case, things still appear generally as they ordinarily do, but are some other way; one still believes p but p is false; by any standards, one fails to know p, for only true propositions are known. (p. 165)

Williamson continues

> Uncontroversially, if one is in the bad case then one does not know that one is not in the good case. Even if one pessimistically believes that one is not in the good case, one's true belief does not constitute knowledge; one has no reason to suppose that appearances are misleading to that extent. More generally, it is consistent with everything one knows in the bad case that one is in the good case. . . . For the sceptic, the two cases are symmetrical: just as it is consistent with everything one knows in the bad case that one is in the good case, so it is consistent with everything one knows in the good case that one is in the bad case. One simply cannot tell which case one is in. For the sceptic's opponent, the two cases are not symmetrical: although it is consistent with everything one knows in the bad case that one is in the good case, it is not consistent with everything one knows in the good case that one is in the bad case. For in the good case, according to the sceptic's opponent, one knows p (for example, that one has hands), and also (by description of the bad case) that if one is in the bad case then p is false. (pp. 165–6)

This is intended as a neutral description of what the sceptic and his opponent would say about the sceptic's examples. For Williamson, the issue between them is joined when the sceptic insists that the subject has exactly the same evidence in both the good case and the bad case. Call this the *sameness of evidence* thesis. Williamson concedes that if the sceptic can establish this point, he has won: evidence insufficient for the truth of p is evidence insufficient to give knowledge of p (p. 174). But why think that the subject has the same evidence in both cases?

On the sceptic's behalf, Williamson suggests the following *reductio*. Suppose that in the bad case the subject had less evidence than in the good case. If evidence were luminous, the subject would be in a position to know how little evidence he has. Knowing also how much evidence he would have were he in the good case, he would be able to deduce from this that he was not in the good case. But it is "uncontroversial" that the subject in the bad case cannot know that he is not in the good case. Therefore, the subject in the bad case

must have the same evidence as the subject in the good case. Williamson remarks that "if something like this argument is not the reason for which sceptics and others think that one has the same evidence in the two cases, it is not at all clear what it is" (p. 173).

This sceptical argumentation rests on the assumption that evidence, as well as knowledge, is luminous and Williamson rejects that assumption. He attacks it by producing a scalar case (pp. 174–8). Suppose visual experience is our evidence for the height of a tree. We can move from points at which we have such evidence and know that we do (the tree appears not to be 500 inches tall) to points at which we have such evidence but don't know that we have it (the tree appears not to be 600 inches tall) to points at which we lack such evidence (the tree does not appear not to be 665 inches tall). In the intermediate case, we can know that the tree is not 600 inches tall on the basis of experience without being in a position to know that we know this. Because our powers of discrimination are limited with respect to our own states, there is an intermediate stage in which one has evidence sufficient to give knowledge but where one is ignorant of this evidence.

In the next section, I question Williamson's diagnosis of scepticism. There is a familiar way of motivating scepticism which does not go via the *sameness of evidence* thesis and the sceptic moved by this line of thought is not directly threatened by Williamson's attack on luminosity.

II

As things are standardly presented, the subject in the bad case is no sceptic: *he* does not think that he fails to know whether he is in the good case. He is quite sure he actually is in the good case and he thinks this because he thinks he is perceiving his hands. Is it reasonable for him so to believe? Many non-sceptics hold that this belief is reasonable and, in several places, Williamson appears to agree with them. In the passage quoted above, he observes that the subject in the bad case "has no reason to suppose that appearances are misleading to that extent" and he adds a bit later on that "one can be rational even in the bad case; misleading evidence sometimes makes false beliefs rational" (p. 170).

Now I think something else is true: one can be *just as* rational in the bad case as in the good. Beliefs formed by the subject in the bad case are no less reasonable simply because he unwittingly finds himself in the bad case. Call this the *equal rationality* thesis. Williamson says that "an epistemically justified belief which falls short of knowledge must be epistemically justified by something; whatever justifies it is evidence" (p. 208). So if the *equal rationality* thesis is true, the evidence the subject in the bad case has that he is in the good case must be just as strong as the evidence that the subject in the good case has that he is in the good case. The subject in the bad case is no less reasonable in supposing that he is in the good case than he would be were he actually in the good case, so the evidence supporting his belief in the bad case must be just as strong as it would be were he actually in the good case.

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This conclusion is not equivalent to the *sameness of evidence* thesis: to establish that two subjects have equally strong evidence for *p* is not to establish that they have exactly the same evidence for *p*. But why need the sceptic take any further interest in *sameness of evidence*? Here is one sceptical argument which depends entirely on *equal rationality*: 'You think you are entitled to believe you are in the good case; yet were you in the bad case you would be just as entitled to believe that you are in the good case; therefore, you are really no more entitled to believe that you are in the good case than in the bad case; hence your belief that you are in the good case is unreasonable.' Given the plausible idea (which Williamson endorses on pp. 203 and 264–5) that unreasonable belief cannot constitute knowledge, it follows that you don't know that you are in the good case, even when you are in fact in the good case.

Much the same line of thought holds for less extravagant forms of error. Williamson considers a subject who enjoys an illusory perceptual experience as of *p* but has no reason to think it illusory (pp. 198–9). Williamson says that such a subject has evidence for their belief that *p*, namely their knowledge of how things appear to them. According to Williamson, the evidence on which this subject bases their belief in *p* differs from that available to a subject who actually perceives that *p*: the latter subject needs no knowledge of appearances to justify their belief for they perceive that *p*. But why does this postulated difference in evidence have any impact on how reasonable the belief supported is?

Williamson allows that both the perceiver and the non-perceiver know that it appears to them that *p*, though they will consider this proposition only if they have reason to suspect that circumstances are unfavourable. Neither is considering this proposition because neither has such reasons and the reasons required to make them consider it are the same in both cases: namely reasons which throw doubt on the idea that they are perceiving that *p*. The obvious hypothesis is that these two subjects are similar in one respect—being equally reasonable in believing that *p*—because they are similar in another, namely in its appearing to them that *p* and in their having no reason to believe that this appearance might be illusory. The claim on which Williamson insists— that one party has a further piece of evidence available to him—makes no odds in our assessment of the rationality of these beliefs. The fact that our subject perceives that *p* is, so far as his rationality goes, screened off by the fact that it appears to him that *p*.

Now one may or may not find sceptical argumentation based on *equal rationality* convincing. I shall not attempt an assessment of it here. Its familiarity is enough. My point is this: to deal with this sceptic Williamson needs to direct his fire against *equal rationality*, not *sameness of evidence*. But perhaps Williamson's scalar argumentation is indeed intended to throw the *equal rationality* assumption into doubt. I shall explore this possibility in the final section.

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III

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Earlier, I quoted Williamson as saying that "an epistemically justified belief which falls short of knowledge must be epistemically justified by something;

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whatever justifies it is evidence". But how does evidence justify belief? To put the question another way: what does it mean for someone to 'respect their evidence'?

I shall consider two possible answers. The first is that rational subjects must regulate their beliefs by making higher-order judgements which are explicitly about their evidence and its probative force, judgements which constitute knowledge of that evidence and which motivate the beliefs suggested by it. The second answer is that their beliefs must be based on sufficient evidence, where 'based' means that these beliefs must be causally sensitive to this evidence.[1]

Let's take these proposals in order. Few would maintain that rational subjects always regulate their beliefs by making higher order judgements about the probative force of their evidence. But many hold that rational subjects must be in a position to regulate their beliefs in such a way, should this be appropriate. The rest of the time, we trust that our beliefs are causally sensitive to our evidence without our having to check up on them. Now Williamson's scalar argumentation, which I am accepting, threatens this view. Williamson describes cases in which we know something about a tree's height by sight—and so have beliefs which are causally sensitive to the presence of sufficient evidence for this proposition about the tree's height—without our being in a position either to know that we know this thing or to know that we have evidence for it sufficient to justify belief in it. Yet the subject in Williamson's scalar cases is not irrational: his beliefs do not fail to respect his evidence. Therefore, this first conception of 'respecting one's evidence' is too strong. One can respect one's evidence without being in a position to know what it is.

Turn now to the second proposal. Williamson tells us that a belief may be "*implicitly* evidence based" in that it is "appropriately causally sensitive to the evidence for *p*" without being "*explicitly* evidence based" i.e. without being "influenced by prior beliefs about the evidence for *p*" (p. 191). Williamson also remarks that "one can be causally sensitive to appropriate properties of one's evidence without being in a position to know them exactly" (p. 180). We may deduce that if the subject is causally sensitive to evidence E, then he is in a position to respect that evidence, i.e. he will form only the beliefs which the evidence supports, provided he is rational. And all this may be so even though he is in no position to know of this evidence E because any judgement he makes about E enjoys too little 'margin for error' to constitute knowledge.[2]

Is this conclusion problematic? Williamson suggests that many philosophers will find it so. On their behalf, he poses himself the following questions:

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1. In *Reason Without Freedom* (Routledge, 2000) I attack the first model of rationality (though not in the way Williamson does) and defend something like the second.
2. On pp. 200–3 Williamson maintains that only propositions which are known to a subject count as evidence for that subject. Williamson argues that evidence must be known by dismissing two possible counterexamples: first, where the subject has merely probabilistic grounds for thinking that an evidential proposition is true and second where the subject does not believe the evidential proposition in question because they are misled by countervailing evidence. In such cases, Williamson argues that the proposition in question can't constitute evidence for that subject, however true it may be. I doubt that this argumentation bears on the case we are considering.

How can rational thinkers respect their evidence if they do not know what their evidence is? If rationality requires one to respect one's evidence, then it is irrational not to respect one's evidence. But how can failing to respect one's evidence be irrational when one is not in a position to know that one is failing to respect one's evidence? (p. 179)

Yet these questions are pressing only so long as we assume that the sole way of being sensitive to one's evidence is to be in a position to make knowledge-able judgements about it. If one can be sensitive to one's evidence without knowing it—causally sensitive—then one's beliefs can be based on one's evidence and be justified by it without one's being in a position to know that this is so. The subjects in both the good and the bad case are causally sensitive to evidence which justifies their beliefs; their beliefs are equally reasonable because their evidence is equally strong.

But some of Williamson's observations do suggest that he has doubts about *equal rationality*:

Sufficiently bad cognitive circumstances may involve obstacles even to causal sensitivity to one's evidence. The bad case in the sceptical argument may be a case in point. One's cognitive circumstances may be so bad that one is in no position to know how impoverished one's evidence is in comparison to the good case. Our causal insensitivity to any difference in evidence between the two cases does not show that there is no difference between them. (p. 180)

The point of this paragraph is not entirely clear since Williamson switches from talking about *causal sensitivity* to evidence to talking about *knowledge* of evidence and back again. But Williamson does seem to maintain that something can be evidence for a subject even though he is causally insensitive to it, even though he is in no position to respect it. And if evidence is what makes belief rational and someone in the bad case is casually insensitive to how little evidence he has then, so far as forming rational beliefs go, he looks to be worse off than someone in the good case who is sensitive to how much evidence he has.

Such doubts about *equal rationality* come closer to the surface when Williamson replies to those questions he put to himself earlier:

Just as one cannot always know what one's evidence is, so one cannot always know what rationality requires of one. Just like evidence, the requirements of rationality differ between indiscriminable situations. Rationality may be a matter of doing the best one can with what one has, but one cannot always know what one has, or whether one has done the best one can with it. (p. 179)

The first two sentences here seem to be saying that those who find themselves in the bad case are in no position to be fully rational, are in no position to meet the demands of Reason however sober they may be, while the third

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sentence softens the harshness of this judgement by suggesting that Reason demands of us no more than a good try at meeting its standards, allowing those in the bad case to be equally rational after all. But we are given no hint of what might constitute 'doing the best one can with what one has' once the notion of sensitivity to evidence is no longer in play.

An analogy drawn by Williamson might be intended to help here. He suggests that the rule 'Proportion your belief to the evidence' is like the rule 'Proportion your voice to the size of the room': someone can do their best to follow both rules and yet fail through no fault of their own (p. 192). The analogy limps. Rationality does not require anyone to proportion their voice to the size of the room, however strong the considerations in favour of so doing; it merely requires them to proportion their voice to how big the room appears to be. Williamson rightly observes that this need not involve acting on beliefs about precisely how big the room appears to be—that's the sort of thing a rational person may be ignorant of—but it will involve one's actions being causally sensitive to one's beliefs about (or experiences of) the size of the room. By contrast, rationality does require us to proportion our beliefs to our evidence *simpliciter*. Because the canons of rationality themselves tell us what constitutes a good enough attempt at forming a belief which is true, one can't try hard enough to meet them without actually meeting them. So our reaction to someone who flouts these standards can't be softened in the way suggested.

I'm unsure whether Williamson does, in the end, reject *equal rationality*. The last quotation speaks of what one can *know* of one's evidence and if knowledge of evidence alone is at issue then I think the points Williamson makes about rationality should be accepted. But if knowledge of evidence alone is at issue, these points will not help defeat the sceptic because they do not threaten *equal rationality*.[3]