Book Review


In his new book Michael Williams discusses the epistemological problems conceived of as standard-problems. But he does not pretend to be a neutral observer of the epistemological debate. Thus apart from being an introduction to epistemological problems this book gives a clear account of Williams’s own contextualist position developed in his earlier books.

The 20 chapters of this book can be grouped into four larger parts. The first part mainly deals with the problem of analysing the concept of knowledge (chapters 1–4), while the rest of the book is in one way or another concerned with the sceptical challenge. Part Two (chapters 5–12) states the sceptical problem in its Agrippian and Cartesian form and criticises foundationalist and coherentist attempts at its solution. Part Three (chapters 13–16) provides Williams’s diagnosis of sceptical questions and his contextualist epistemology. Part Four (chapters 17–20) deals with the problems of induction and relativism.

Williams takes epistemology to be a genuinely normative enterprise. It is not about what we believe but rather about what we are entitled to believe. Therefore, according to Williams, the prospects of naturalising epistemology are quite bleak. Instead there are distinctively philosophical problems of knowledge. Williams lists five: the analytic problem (How is our concept of knowledge to be analysed?), the problem of demarcation (What is the scope of knowledge? What significant boundaries are there within the province of knowledge?), the problem of method (How is knowledge to be obtained?), the problem of scepticism (Is knowledge possible at all?), and the problem of value (Why is knowledge worth having?). Williams points out that our concern with knowledge is entangled with our western, “critical” tradition as a whole. Scepticism is such a pressing problem, because it goes to the very heart of philosophy as a critical enterprise.

Williams endorses what you may call the standard analysis of the concept of knowledge: knowledge is justified true belief. Everything here, of course,
depends on what “justified” is supposed to mean. There are two different readings: a person $S$ may be personally justified in believing that $p$ if she forms her belief in an epistemically responsible way. On the other hand, the belief that $p$ can be said to be objectively justified, if $S$ adopts it on the basis of adequate grounds. According to Williams (and others) both kinds of justification are called for if knowledge is to be achieved. So Williams rejects what he calls purely externalist accounts of knowledge: Since knowledge cannot be detached form entitlement, obtaining a true belief in a de facto reliable manner does not suffice for knowledge. If challenged, one must also be able to justify what one believes. Besides, reliability itself is a normative and interest-relative concept. What the standards of reliability are, is not fixed by nature. There is, therefore, no way of naturalising the concept of knowledge.

Williams contrasts two rival ideals operative in our conception of knowledge. One takes as a starting point the axiomatic method (paradigmatically exemplified by Euclidean geometry). According to this ideal, knowledge has to be secure. The objects of knowledge are universal and necessary truths. The appropriate justification is conclusive proof from self-evident truths as premises. The other conception of knowledge is fallibilist. We can know things, even if error is not logically excluded. As a consequence knowledge ceases to be stable: knowledge claims might be undermined by reasons emerging in the course of inquiry. The modern conception of knowledge is fallibilist, and scepticism has to be distinguished from this view if it is to be a problem for modern epistemologists.

I think Williams is right in claiming that knowledge is not stable in the sense that knowledge claims may come to grief when new evidence is available. But in discussing indefeasibility solutions to the Gettier problem he makes to much of this insight. Starting from Fogelin’s discussion of the well-known Grabit-example, Williams concludes that there need not be a fact of the matter as to whether $S$ knows that Grabit stole the book, because our intuitions concerning this example tend to flip-flop. I think this is by and large true. But this phenomenon cannot be explained by our fallibilist intuitions about knowledge, as Williams suggests. It is one thing to say that the conditions for knowledge might not be fulfilled even if we think that they are or that they might cease to be fulfilled (a true belief might become false when things change, a belief responsibly held at first might become unreasonable to maintain when new evidence emerges) and quite another to say that there is no fact of the matter as to whether they are fulfilled or not. Fogelin’s discussion of the Grabit-example suggests the latter, the fallibilist accepts the former. And if there really is no fact of the matter about knowledge, then this is surely something in need of an explanation,