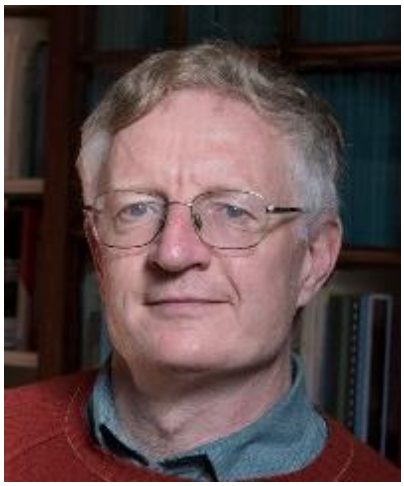
INTERVIEW* WITH TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON ON EPISTEMOLOGY
TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON İLE BİLGİ KURAMI ÜZERİNE

Timothy Williamson**



4 QUESTIONS ABOUT EPISTEMOLOGY

BİLGİ KURAMI HAKKINDA 4 SORU

Q-1 *What do you think about the autonomy of epistemology as a discipline? Is it interdisciplinary or not?*

Timothy Williamson- Philosophers since Plato, and perhaps earlier, have discussed questions in epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Many of the great philosophers have done much of their most important work in epistemology – think of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant, for example. But epistemology as a self-conscious sub-discipline of philosophy is much more recent. The word 'epistemology' seems to have been first used in print only in 1856, by

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Selected Publications:

Semantics and Heuristics of Conditionals(2020)*,Debating the A Priori* (with P.Boghossian 2020), *Philosophical Method* (2020), *Identity and Discrimination* (1990 & 2013).; *Vagueness* (1994).; *Knowledge and Its Limits* (2000 & 2002).; *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007).; *Modal Logic as Metaphysics* (2013 & 2015).; *Tetralogue* (*I'm Right, You're Wrong*). (2015).; *Vagueness* (ed. with Delia Graff [now Delia Graff Fara]) (2002).

the Scottish philosopher James Ferrier. The practice of describing oneself as an 'epistemologist' is even more recent. It's an example of the trend towards increasing specialization in all academic disciplines. But now epistemology has an institutional existence with its own conferences and journals. Philosophy departments advertise jobs for epistemologists, knowing what they are looking for. Epistemology has its distinctive questions and distinctive skills. If someone with no background in the history of epistemology (perhaps its very recent history) tries to construct a theory of knowledge, it will look – and almost certainly *be* – terribly naïve. In those sorts of ways, epistemology is indeed an autonomous sub-discipline of philosophy.

But no inquiry can assume that it has nothing to learn from other inquiries. In particular, epistemology cannot afford to neglect what is going on in other branches of philosophy and outside philosophy. Your second question below concerns one case of the former (the relation of epistemology to metaphysics) and your third question concerns a couple of cases of the latter (the relations of epistemology to psychology and sociology), which I discuss in my answers to those questions. Here I'll mention some more examples.

Epistemology must take into account developments in many other branches of philosophy. For a start, it must respect logic. That's most obvious in formal epistemology, where the tradition going back to Jaakko Hintikka's book *Knowledge and Belief* (1962) applies the techniques of modal logic (the logic of possibility and necessity) to questions in epistemology. But in fact logic and epistemology were already interacting in Aristotle's work. Medieval scholastic philosophers studied logical paradoxes about knowledge. Contemporary epistemology still has much to learn from logic. For instance, it provides a rigorous framework within which to construct and explore formal models that cast light on the structure of epistemological phenomena, in a way similar to natural scientists' use of mathematical models of physical systems. I've been doing some work of that sort myself recently. For instance, one can model situations in which someone knows something, even though it's almost certain on their own evidence that they don't know it.

Another case is the relation of epistemology to the philosophy of science. In the 1970s there was a trend for creating university departments of the history and philosophy of science. A very unfortunate side-effect was to separate the philosophy of science from the rest of philosophy, to the detriment of both sides. The epistemological aspect of the philosophy of science, the study of the nature of scientific knowledge, has suffered because it has generally taken for granted some very dubious assumptions that epistemologists have been questioning – in particular, it has made 'internalist' assumptions to the effect that the epistemic status of an individual or community's beliefs must always be in principle accessible to that individual or community. Because philosophers of science were less concerned with what one might call 'foundational' questions in epistemology, they did not recognize how contentious their assumptions were. But epistemology has lost out too, because it has not paid sufficient attention to scientific examples. For instance, many epistemologists think of one's evidence, one's data, as consisting of one's own private internal mental states, which is very implausible when applied to science, where evidence is supposed to be publicly available.

Again, epistemologists have to take notice of the philosophy of mathematics, because mathematical knowledge is very different in some ways from most of our other knowledge, since it does not depend on observation or experiment, yet it is some of the best knowledge we have, because it is generated by rigorous proofs. Epistemological theories that seem to work quite well for most of our knowledge often make no sense of mathematical knowledge. Conversely, philosophers of mathematics have to take notice of epistemology, because otherwise they may make outdated assumptions about knowledge in general.

For related reasons, epistemology must take account of developments in the philosophy of mind. Many epistemologists still rely unreflectively on an early modern conception of consciousness, on which what one is most intimately acquainted with is one's own inner states. Contemporary work in the philosophy of mind on introspection undermines the credibility of such a picture. It's often easier to know one's physical surroundings than it is to know one's own mind. It's also clear that the epistemology of sense perception and memory shouldn't be done independently of work in the philosophy of mind on the nature of sense perception and memory.

Yet another example is the philosophy of language. It's relevant because some arguments in epistemology have been accused by so – called 'contextualists' of committing subtle fallacies by ignoring ways in which key terms such as 'know' and 'justified belief' shift their reference according to the context in which they are used – a bit like the way words such as 'I' and 'here' change in reference according to who is speaking, and where, only the changes in reference for 'know' and 'justified belief' are much less obvious. The standards for applying them may vary according to what is relevant to the purposes of the conversation. For instance, many contextualists explain the seductive appeal of sceptical arguments by arguing that they illegitimately exploit unnoticed shifts in the reference of 'know' half-way through the argument, for instance when mention of new ways of being mistaken raises the standards for assessment. In order to determine whether such linguistic effects are confusing us, and if so to control for them, we need to understand how such linguistic mechanisms work, and how we can test for the presence of such effects. For that we need to go to the philosophy of language and, outside philosophy, to linguistics. Another example is the distinction between knowing how to do something (practical knowledge) and knowing that something is the case (propositional knowledge). Following the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle, many epistemologists have assumed a deep divide between practical knowledge and propositional knowledge. In joint work with Jason Stanley (now at Yale), I have argued that that is a mistake. We applied theories from semantics as a branch of linguistics to analyse the meaning of the 'know how to' construction and showed that knowing how to do something is actually just a special case of knowing that something is the case. It is knowing a proposition about knowing how to do something (say, how to ride a bicycle), when that proposition is presented to one in a manner that allows one to apply it in action. In order not to be parochial, it is also good to examine how similar constructions work in other languages, which involves some serious linguistics. An ex-student of mine, Andreas Ditter, looked at the constructions used in Turkish to talk about such matters – I've had some interesting discussions with him about that.

I could multiply examples even further, but I hope that the general picture is clear. Epistemology is an autonomous branch of philosophy, just as other disciplines have autonomous branches. That is fully compatible with its having many fruitful interactions both with other branches of philosophy and with other disciplines beyond philosophy.

Q-2 *What would you say about the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology? Do they overlap?*

Timothy Williamson- The relationship between metaphysics and epistemology is itself an issue in metaphysics, concerning the relations of dependence between reality and knowledge of reality. According to so-called anti-realists such as the late Michael Dummett, my old teacher and predecessor as the Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford, it is ultimately incoherent to say that some facts are impossible to know. For such philosophers, any necessary limits of knowledge are also necessary limits of reality itself. Since some of the questions epistemology deals with concern the necessary limits of knowledge, and some of the questions metaphysics deals with concern the necessary limits of reality, epistemology and metaphysics overlap in a central way, and perhaps in the end cannot even be distinguished. However, such anti-realism has proved hard to defend – it is based on ideas about meaning that haven't worked out. Like many philosophers these days, I am a realist. Thinkers and knowers are complex systems, presumably with an underlying physical basis; we form just one small part of the universe. We can even know that about ourselves. There is no good reason to project our limitations onto reality itself.

For a realist, metaphysics and epistemology are separate enterprises. But that doesn't mean that there are no connections between them. At the very least, our metaphysics and our epistemology should be consistent with each other. For instance, in the philosophy of mathematics, our metaphysical theory about the nature of mathematical reality should be consistent with our epistemological theory about the nature of our knowledge of that mathematical reality. However, I think that some philosophers exaggerate the difficulty of satisfying such general consistency requirements.

In practice, most epistemology and most metaphysics in the contemporary analytic tradition are done in a broadly realist spirit. Each makes only occasional reference to the other. However, there are some interesting connections between epistemology and the metaphysics of mind. In particular, an issue central to the metaphysics of mind is whether mental states are purely internal to the brain ('internalism'), or instead can be partly constituted by the objects, properties, and relations in the external environment that are being thought about ('externalism'). I'm an externalist. For instance, loving another person isn't something that just happens inside your brain: it involves having a relation to someone outside you. That's the point of it. This matters for epistemology, because the internalist view that mental states are purely internal to the brain has encouraged philosophers to treat belief as prior to, and more basic than, knowledge. The reason is that belief looks at first sight as though it is purely internal to the brain, whereas knowledge is obviously not purely internal: for example, a necessary precondition for knowing that it is raining is that it *is* raining, a state of affairs external to your

brain. Internalists conclude that belief is a genuine mental state, whereas knowledge isn't. They try to explain knowledge as a sort of hybrid of internal mental states and external environmental conditions. That sort of internalism has had a widespread influence in epistemology. My view is that it gets things completely the wrong way round. Not even belief is purely internal, because it typically involves a relation to the external things our beliefs are about. For instance, the belief that this apple is red is essentially related to this apple. Indeed, a crucial function of mental states is to enable us to take account of the complexities of the external environment when deciding what to do. Effective action is based on knowledge, not just belief. I want to understand the nature of belief in terms of the nature of knowledge, not the other way round. Thus one's views about the metaphysics of mind can have important implications for one's views about epistemology.

Q-3 *What are your opinions about psychologism in epistemology, and about the relationship of epistemology to psychology and sociology?*

Timothy Williamson- Psychologism tries to reduce questions in epistemology (and philosophy more generally) to questions in psychology. It's a bad idea for at least two reasons. First, much of psychology focusses on contingent features of human knowledge and belief, whereas key questions in epistemology are about necessary features of all possible knowledge and belief. Second, contemporary psychology tends to focus on internal aspects of mental states, whereas an external connection to the environment is crucial to knowledge and many other mental states, as I explained in my answer to Q-2.

None of that implies that epistemology has nothing to learn from psychology. Of course it has. The epistemology of visual perception learns from the psychology of visual perception, the epistemology of memory learns from the psychology of memory, the epistemology of reasoning learns from the psychology of reasoning, and so on. One reason is that, although epistemology is not psychology, the examples of knowledge epistemologists typically think about are examples of *human* knowledge, for obvious reasons. If one makes false assumptions about the psychological processes involved in those examples, one will misunderstand the cases, and any philosophical conclusions one draws are liable to be mistaken.

Another instance of the light psychology sheds in epistemology concerns child development. There is some experimental evidence that children understand the distinction between knowledge and ignorance earlier than they understand the distinction between true and false belief. That casts at least some doubt on the assumptions, made by many epistemologists, that the concept of belief is more basic than the concept of knowledge, and that the latter should be analysed in terms of the former. But psychologistic philosophers are not satisfied with those sorts of beneficial influence. They want something more like the assimilation of epistemology to psychology.

One version of psychologistic epistemology goes back to the American philosopher Willard van Orman Quine's 'naturalized epistemology'. He wanted epistemology to be done as part of natural science, and the most relevant branches of natural science would be psychology

and neuroscience. However, Quine was influenced by the behaviourist school of psychologists such as Skinner, which was superseded in psychology when he was in mid-career. Even though the cognitive psychology that superseded it was much closer to epistemology in important ways, he did not show much interest in actual developments in psychology. Like quite a number of philosophers who advocate naturalism in theory, in practice he was more inclined to project his independently developed philosophical views onto natural science than to find out where natural science was actually going.

In more recent times, some self-described 'experimental philosophers', such as Stephen Stich and his collaborators, have criticized contemporary analytic epistemology for its reliance on thought experiments, imagined scenarios used as counterexamples to epistemological hypotheses. The most famous ones are hypothetical examples used by Edmund Gettier in a classic paper of 1963 to refute the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Gettier's starting-point was that a belief can be false but justified, where there is strong but misleading evidence in its favour; but a true conclusion can sometimes be validly derived from a false premise (for instance, the false premise 'The population of Istanbul is seven million' entails the true conclusion 'The population of Istanbul is more than six million'), so by competent deduction from a justified false belief someone can acquire a justified true belief, but it won't be knowledge because its justification depends on a false assumption; therefore it is a counterexample to the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Stich and others did some surveys which seemed to show that the classification of Gettier's imaginary examples as not cases of knowledge was not universal to all human societies, but was more specific to Western white males. Consequently, those experimental philosophers proposed that epistemologists (and people in other branches of philosophy too) should stop relying on their verdicts about thought experiments, because there was too much risk of ethnic and gender bias. Instead, they advocated a style of epistemology (and philosophy more generally) based on experimental investigation of what different groups actually think about various hypothetical examples.

More recently, when people repeated such experiments under more carefully controlled conditions, they did not reproduce the original patterns of variation. Instead, they found that the verdicts on thought experiments such as Gettier's are more like human universals after all. So the objection to relying on thought experiments in epistemology has been undermined. In any case, although finding out what ordinary people think about hypothetical examples may be interesting, it doesn't take us very far in epistemology, because it doesn't tell us whether what they think is correct. It is at best a preliminary to constructive epistemological theorizing.

Pressures internal to epistemology can result in a different kind of psychologization. Many epistemologists assume that the evidence or data we have to go on in forming our beliefs must be cognitively accessible to us in the sense that we are always in a position to determine what is part of our evidence and what isn't, because otherwise the rationality of a belief, whether it is appropriately supported by the evidence, would itself not be cognitively accessible to us, which would in turn be inconsistent with the decision-guiding role of rationality, according to them. But if our evidence consisted mainly of facts about the external world, we should not

always be in a position to determine what is part of it and what isn't, for instance when appearances are misleading. Such philosophers therefore tend to treat our evidence as consisting of facts about our internal world, our own internal psychological states. This makes scepticism a much bigger problem, for how can we know what's out there in the external physical world purely on the basis of what's in here in our internal world?

In my view, developed in my book *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford University Press, 2000), the demand always to be in a position to know what's part of our evidence and what isn't turns out to be unreasonable. I argue in the book that *whatever* evidence is, we will sometimes not be in a position to know what part of it is and what isn't. We just have to learn to live with the fact that we have only imperfect cognitive access to the boundaries of our evidence, and to the boundaries of what it is rational to do on that evidence. Thus the psychologization of evidence is ill-motivated. On my positive view, the total content of one's evidence is simply the total content of what one knows. Since one sometimes knows something without being in a position to know that one knows it, and one sometimes fails to know something without being in a position to know that one fails to know it, one is indeed sometimes not in a position to know the boundaries of one's evidence.

An even stranger phenomenon is the sociologization of evidence, which sometimes occurs for reasons similar to those for the psychologization of evidence. For example, there is a debate about what you should do when you find out that someone just as intelligent and well-informed as you are has the opposite opinion on some matter. Should you persist with your original belief, despite the new evidence of their disagreement, or compromise and become agnostic on the matter? Epistemologists discussing this issue often implicitly assume that your only relevant evidence consists of sociological facts about who believes what, because in defining the problem they assume that no other evidence needs to be specified. Yet that doesn't make much epistemological sense, because the evidence of each person in the disagreement is assumed to include the fact that the other person has the opposite opinion, which is a fact about the world external to the first person, so why not also include all sorts of other facts they know about the external world in their relevant evidence?

Sociology may also have the potential to play a more positive role in epistemology. Epistemologists have started to get interested in the idea that groups as well as individuals may have beliefs – for instance, the knowledge of a community of scientists, or the religious beliefs of a society. Sometimes the results of this interest can be rather bland, because the investigation is carried out on the basis of too thin and unrealistic a conception of the nature of the group. Perhaps it needs to be deepened by an injection of sociological insights. One obvious resource is the sociology of science. Unfortunately, it has been somewhat discredited amongst philosophers by the tendency of high-profile sociologists of science to assume a naïve and ill-conceived relativism that doesn't allow them to consider issues about the truth and falsity of the scientific theories under discussion, but once one strips away that veneer of incompetent philosophizing there are good prospects for finding valuable sociological insights underneath that may enrich the epistemology of groups.

Q-4 *What would you say against critiques of epistemology (for instance, those concerning the death of the subject or of epistemology)?*

Timothy Williamson- It is of course perfectly legitimate to criticize specific epistemological theories or even more general approaches to epistemology, but to criticize epistemology just as epistemology is obscurantist. Knowledge is a genuine phenomenon. To deny that is itself to put forward an extreme and implausible epistemological theory: radical scepticism. Since there is knowledge, it is intellectually legitimate to investigate its nature.

In practice, critics of epistemology just as epistemology tend to be embarrassingly ignorant of what actually goes on in contemporary epistemology. Presumably, they are too lazy to find out – it isn't hard to do so. Often, they think that the main purpose of epistemology is to 'refute the sceptic', a model of epistemology based on Descartes' philosophy. If they could be bothered to look, they would soon find out that very little epistemology is concerned to do that.

Even when contemporary epistemologists discuss sceptical arguments, they are usually not trying to start with assumptions the sceptic would accept and then from that starting point prove that we have knowledge. That's a hopeless enterprise because what the full-blooded sceptic accepts is so little that it does not form the starting-point for any useful inquiry. To become a sceptic is to fall into a pit from which, intellectually, no escape is possible. For us non-sceptics, what matters is to make sure that we don't fall into that pit ourselves. So we may examine arguments for scepticism to see where they go wrong. That turns out to be quite a subtle and rewarding issue, because sceptical arguments often take too far intellectual strategies that, applied in moderation, are valuable.

An example is the strategy of suspending one's own beliefs or ways of thinking in order to test whether they can be justified on independent grounds. Doing some of that is intellectually healthy. But suspending all one's beliefs and ways of thinking simultaneously, if it were possible to do so, would be intellectual suicide, because one would have thrown away any basis for testing them. The sceptic is like someone who gets so enthusiastic about the idea that it is bad to be greedy that she ends up starving herself to death.

In any case, even diagnosing the flaws in sceptical arguments is quite a small part of contemporary epistemology. Rather than constantly worrying about whether we really do have knowledge, contemporary epistemologists are more likely to investigate the nature of the knowledge we do have (and often know we have) – including knowledge from our senses, knowledge from introspection, knowledge by memory, knowledge by testimony, knowledge by inference, and so on. In addition to knowledge, contemporary epistemologists are also concerned with various sorts of reasonable belief, probability on the evidence, and the like. All these investigations give rise to lots of further questions, most of which do not concern sceptical arguments.

Announcing the death of epistemology is almost as silly as announcing the death of mathematics. As for the death of the subject, that is a typical piece of overheated 1970s

postmodernist rhetoric. I have no trouble agreeing that we are not Cartesian egos, and I can also agree that too much contemporary epistemology conceives us as much more like Cartesian egos than we really are. But doing epistemology does not *have* to involve conceiving ourselves as Cartesian egos, just as it does not have to involve trying to refute the sceptic. We can simply conceive ourselves as members of the human species. To deny that there are individual humans is as silly as denying that there are individual cats and dogs.

Members of many other species (chimpanzees, cats, dogs, elephants, crows…) have some knowledge of their environments. Humans have rather more knowledge than they do. Our species is the only one we know of to do epistemology. It makes sense to investigate knowledge with reference to examples of knowledge that cats and dogs have, so why shouldn't it make sense to investigate knowledge with reference to the much richer range of examples of knowledge that members of our own species have?