

'The most general factive stative attitude'

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In *Knowledge and its Limits* Timothy Williamson defends the 'conjecture' that 'knowing is the most general factive stative attitude, that which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all'. (2000: 34) He describes this as 'a modest positive account of the concept *knows*'. (2000: 22)¹

Now the phrase after the comma, 'that which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all', is presented as a gloss on 'the most general factive stative attitude'. But the two phrases do not have the same meaning, and the ideas they express –

(i) Knowing is the most general factive stative attitude,

and

(ii) Knowing is the (or at least a) factive stative attitude one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all –

are not equivalent, because a genus is not the same as a necessary condition, even a uniquely necessary condition.

But must we interpret the phrase 'the most general factive stative attitude' as meaning the genus of which other factive stative attitudes are species? Perhaps not. Another statement of the principal idea confirms this interpretation: 'knowledge', Williamson writes, 'is the most general factive mental state, of which perception and memory are sub-species' (2000, online edition: ch.1, abstract). But he also compares knowing with being coloured, and coloured/red is commonly cited as an example of determinable/determinate as opposed to genus/species:

To picture the proposal, compare the state of knowing with the property of being coloured, the colour property which something has if it has any colour property at all. If something is coloured, then it has a more specific colour property; it is red or green or . . . [. . .] Similarly, if one knows that A, then there is a specific way in which one knows; one can see or remember or . . . that A. (2000: 34)

A cautious interpretation of (i) is therefore that other factive stative attitudes to a proposition are either species or determinates or ways of knowing

1 Taking the semantic escalator up a floor, Williamson defines an FMSO as a semantically unanalyzable factive verb or verb phrase, lacking a progressive tense, which 'ascribes an attitude to a proposition to the subject' (2000: 36), and he proposes that "'know" is the most general FMSO, the one that applies if any FMSO at all applies.' (2000: 39) I shall stick to the material mode throughout.

it. But of course this does not alter the fact that (i) is not equivalent to (ii), because neither a genus nor a determinable nor the converse of a way is the same as a necessary condition, or a uniquely necessary condition.

But does the difference between (i) and (ii) have a significant impact on the plausibility or the value of Williamson's proposal? It certainly does. For (i) is a more ambitious claim than (ii), in the sense that (i) implies (ii) whereas (ii) does not imply (i), and therefore more difficult to prove. And (i) is a bold and rather elegant theory of knowledge – like Descartes's theory that extension is the most general property of matter, though of course that was a theory of matter rather than extension – and it explains, or purports to explain, why (ii) is true; whereas (ii), if it *is* true, is a datum a theory of knowledge might be expected to explain, rather than a theory or 'account', even a 'modest account', of knowledge in its own right.

In this brief article, I shall ignore some of the more difficult questions raised by Williamson's conjecture, for example, the question of whether facts are propositions, and hence whether knowing a fact is an attitude to a proposition at all. So as to focus narrowly on the points I want to explore, I shall assume for the sake of argument that facts *are* propositions, and that knowing and believing things *are* attitudes to propositions. I shall also omit the word 'stative' from now on, since nothing will turn on the distinction between states and processes. It may be taken as read.

I shall argue that (i) is false and (ii) is true. But if that is right, (ii) remains unexplained. So I shall also propose – in bare outline, without filling in the details – an explanation of (ii), as an alternative to (i). I shall approach the topic of attitudes to propositions indirectly, starting with other kinds of objects of attitudes, and seeing how knowing them is related to having other attitudes to them.

Take attitudes to a smell. One cannot like or dislike or even be indifferent to a smell one does not know. Admittedly, someone might say 'I don't know whether I like the smell of lillies, I've never smelled them'. But despite the indicative 'whether I like', this doesn't really mean that he doesn't know whether he *does* like the smell of lillies, it means that he doesn't know whether he *would* like it. (Of course, one may not know that a smell one likes *is* the smell of lillies: one can know a smell without knowing what it is the smell of.)

So, to repeat, one cannot like or dislike or be indifferent to a smell one does not know. But knowing a smell is surely a prerequisite or precondition for having these attitudes to it, rather than a genus of which they are species or a determinable of which they are determinates. Liking a smell does not stand to knowing it as *Homo sapiens* stands to *Homo* or as being red stands to being coloured. The relation is more like that between enjoying fishing and being acquainted with fishing, or having fished. Liking the smell of lillies is not a

species of the genus knowing the smell of lilies, it is a species of the genus liking a smell.

Similarly, knowing a person, or at least knowing about him, is a prerequisite or precondition for loving or hating him. (Children learn to love Mandela and hate Hitler without knowing them personally. It does not matter in this context whether they know them by description rather than by acquaintance, or whether they do not know them, but know about them.) But loving and hating someone are not ways of knowing him, or knowing about him. Perhaps knowing someone well and knowing him badly, or knowing someone by acquaintance and knowing him by description, are ways of knowing him. But loving and hating someone are results of knowing him or knowing about him, not species, determinates, or ways.

Are abstract objects, or objects of thought, different from concrete objects, or objects of sensation, in this respect? They do not seem to be. For one cannot doubt or feel sure of a hypothesis, or believe or disbelieve a theory, unless one knows it. But as with loving and hating a person, these attitudes to a hypothesis or a theory are surely results, or at least the converse of prerequisites, of knowing it, rather than species, determinates, or ways.

Now, finally, factive attitudes to propositions can also be positive, negative or neutral. For example, being glad that summer has arrived is positive, being sad that summer is over is negative, and being indifferent is neutral. And it is plausible that the case of facts is like the other cases mentioned, so that one cannot have any of these attitudes to a fact one does not know, in which case they are not counter-examples to (ii). But they are surely not species, determinates, or ways of knowing a fact. And of course same applies to being thrilled, gutted, amazed or amused that something is the case, regretting, rejoicing in or despairing at a fact, and so on.

How could one show that this is wrong, and that knowing may be the most general factive attitude to a proposition after all? I think one would have to show *either* that being glad, sad, etc., that p are not factive attitudes at all, so that one can be glad that summer has arrived, or sad that it is over, in the middle of winter, as long as one is acquainted with the proposition or capable of thinking the thought concerned; or that 'is glad that', 'is sad that', etc. should be interpreted as 'knows {adverb} that p ', like 'knows *full well* that p ', or 'knows *from personal experience* that p '. I do not believe that either approach is feasible, but I shall not try to prove that here.

In sum, the idea that knowing is the most general factive attitude to a proposition is a bold conjecture. Describing it as a modest account of the concept *knows* is too modest. And if it were true, it would explain *why* knowing that p is a necessary condition for having other factive attitudes to the proposition that p , just as Descartes's idea that every property of matter is a mode of extension would explain why being extended is a

necessary condition for having other material properties, if *it* were true. But it seems to be false, and if it *is* false, the fact that knowing that *p* is a necessary condition for having other factive attitudes to the proposition that *p*, assuming it *is* a fact, remains unexplained.

Presumably part of the explanation, which collects together the various cases mentioned, is that the knowledge requirement distinguishes mental attitudes from physical attitudes and from other kinds of mental states. But we can also approach the problem from the other end and ask what it is about knowing that *p* that makes it a necessary condition for having other factive attitudes to the proposition that *p*. I shall propose an explanation in a moment. First a bit of background.

Most philosophers still think that knowing is, in Ryle's sardonic phrase, an *élite* suburb of believing (1974: 5). (This is compatible with Williamson's view that knowing cannot be defined in terms of believing. For one can reject the idea that knowing is a definable species of believing, and maintain that it is an indefinable determinate of believing instead.) But there is an alternative to the *élite* suburb picture of knowledge apart from the idea that it is the most general factive attitude to a proposition, which is that it is an ability. The general idea originates with Plato, but it is particularly associated in the 20th century with Wittgenstein and Ryle (Plato, Republic 477d; Wittgenstein 1953: §150; Ryle 1949: 133–35).

Ryle points out several ways in which knowledge seems like an ability or skill, while belief seems like a tendency or disposition (1949: 133–35). Among them: Belief, like love or trust, can be foolish, passionate, obstinate, fanatical or whole-hearted, whereas knowledge, like the ability to solve quadratic equations or cast a fly, cannot be any of these things. We can ask or urge someone to believe or not believe something, but we cannot ask or urge someone to know or not know something, but only to remember or forget something, or to find something out. We ask *why* someone believes something, wanting a justification, whereas we ask *how* someone knows something, wanting to be told the means by which the knowledge was acquired. ('How *can* you believe . . .' and 'How are you *able* to believe . . .' are of course perfectly in order.)

The idea that knowledge is an ability transforms the task of defining knowledge, because instead of asking what we need to add to belief to get knowledge, we are forced to ask how knowledge gets exercised or expressed, because this is invariably how abilities are defined. For instance, what is the ability to multiply, and how does it differ from the ability to divide? Or what is the ability to play tennis, and how does it differ from the ability to play squash? The whole answer is given by explaining what multiplying or playing tennis is, and how it differs from dividing or playing squash.

But the idea that knowledge is an ability not only transforms the task of defining knowledge, it also makes it tractable, because it is quite easy to say how knowledge gets expressed. For example, my knowledge of the fact that Hampstead is on the Northern Line gets expressed whenever I am guided by the fact that Hampstead is on the Northern Line, in what I think or feel or do. This happens when I head for the Northern Line at King’s Cross to get home, or when I merely deduce from the fact that Balham is on the Northern Line that one can travel from Hampstead to Balham without changing lines.

My conjecture is therefore that to know a fact is to be able to be guided by it, in other words, to be able to respond to it rationally, or take it into consideration or account.

I have defended this proposal in detail elsewhere (Hyman 1999 and 2010), so I shall not make a case for it here. But if it is right, it is not hard to explain why knowing that p should be a necessary condition for being glad, sad, etc. that p . Take being glad that summer has arrived. This is not merely a change in mood caused by a change in season, like SAD (seasonal affective disorder). If someone is glad that summer has arrived, she is glad *because* summer has arrived. But the fact that summer has arrived is not merely the *reason why* she is glad – though it is that – it is a fact that guides her feelings, a fact she responds to rationally, and therefore her *reason for* feeling glad as well. (Yes, feelings *can* be guided by reasons, despite not being intentional.)

Hence, if knowing a fact is being able to be guided by it, knowing that summer has arrived is a necessary condition for being glad that summer has arrived because being glad that p is one way in which knowing that p can be exercised or expressed. The relationship between them is ability to exercise or disposition to manifestation, which is of course quite unlike genus to species or determinable to determinate. And if knowing a fact is *not* being able to be guided by it the knowledge requirement remains to be explained.

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