

Applications in the Philosophy of Religion: The Coherence of Omniscience

I. The Analysis of Knowledge (Cont'd from Last Week)

Williamson is famous for arguing, or at least asserting, that *knowledge is unanalyzable*.

Suppose we distinguish metaphysical from conceptual analysis, and suppose we say that to metaphysically analyze knowledge is to find a way of filling in the following (where “because” is the “because” of grounding):

S knows that p if and only if, and because, _____.

Does Williamson give us good reason to think that this project is impossible? We can extract from Williamson’s work three main ways of arguing that knowledge is unanalyzable:

- The first is an *inductive argument* from our history of failure at finding a proper analysis of knowledge.

worry: This is a dangerous argument to make, since our history of failure at finding a proper solution to *almost every major problem in philosophy* would seem to lead, by a similar chain of reasoning, to general skepticism about the possibility of succeeding at philosophy.

- The second is a more technical argument that *knowledge is a mental state which cannot be “factored” into separate internal and external components*. One part of that argument is presented in the reading for today. For the rest of that argument, see ch. 2-3 of *Knowledge and Its Limits*.

worry: Fully assessing this argument would take us too far afield. However, it is worth pointing out that, even if successful, this argument only gives us reason to think that there are no analyzes of knowledge of the following form:

S knows that p if and only if, and because, (p & S believes that p & _____).

But not all proposed analyzes of knowledge are conjunctive analyzes of this form. For example, many analyzes of knowledge take the form of an existentially quantified conjunction. (Recall Chudnoff’s account of perceptual knowledge.)

- A third crucial way in which Williamson motivates the idea that knowledge is unanalyzable is via the following thought. Even though $\langle x$ is red \rangle entails $\langle x$ is colored \rangle and not vice versa, it doesn’t follow that we can find a non-circular way of filling in the following:

x is red if and only if (x is colored & _____).

Similarly, Williamson insists, even though $\langle S$ knows that $p \rangle$ entails $\langle p \rangle$ but not vice versa, it doesn’t follow that we can find a non-circular way of filling in the following:

S knows that p if and only if (p & _____).

worry: I think that considerations of grounding show there to be a crucial disanalogy here. The following is extremely plausible:

(*) If S knows that p , then [S knows that p] is partially grounded in [p].

However, with redness, the opposite seems true:

(**) If x is red, then [x is colored] is partially (indeed, fully) grounded in [x is red] (and hence [x is red] is *not* partially grounded in [x is colored]).

So if (*) is what is really driving the thought that knowledge can be metaphysically analyzed in terms of truth and some other stuff, Williamson’s point lapses.

Moreover, how can [p] *partially* ground [S knows that p] without being *part of a full grounds* of [S knows that p]? This doesn’t quite entail that knowledge is analyzable, but it gets us close.

II. Whitcomb on the Incoherence of Omniscience

In “Grounding and Omniscience,” Whitcomb argues that certain platitudes about the grounding relation give us reason to think that omniscience is impossible, and hence that God does not exist.

In Whitcomb’s way of framing his argument, it has three stages: first he argues that five claims are jointly inconsistent, then he argues that one of these five claims is the least plausible of the bunch, and finally he argues that the denial of this least plausible claim entails that God does not exist.

However, since the third stage of Whitcomb’s argument involves three additional assumptions, I prefer to present Whitcomb’s argument as one single argument that relies on seven premises. They are:

- (P1) If God exists, then God is omniscient.
- (P2) If God is omniscient, then God knows every fact.
- (P3) If p , then $[p]$ exists.
- (P4) If $(\forall x)\varphi(x)$ and $\varphi(a)$, then $[(\forall x)\varphi(x)] \leftarrow [\varphi(a)]$.
- (P5) If S knows $[p]$, then $[S \text{ knows } [p]] \leftarrow [p]$.
- (Trans) If $[p] \leftarrow [q]$ and $[q] \leftarrow [r]$, then $[p] \leftarrow [r]$.
- (Irrefl) Not: $[p] \leftarrow [p]$.

We can then argue that God does not exist as follows:

1. God exists. (Supposition for *reductio*.)
2. God is omniscient. (From 1 and P1.)
3. God knows every fact. (From 2 and P2.)
4. [God knows every fact] exists. (From 3 and P3.)
5. God knows [God knows every fact]. (From 3 and 4.)
6. [God knows every fact] \leftarrow [God knows [God knows every fact]]. (From 4, 5, and P4.)
7. [God knows [God knows every fact]] \leftarrow [God knows every fact]. (From 5 and P5.)
8. [God knows every fact] \leftarrow [God knows every fact]. (From 6, 7, and Trans.)
9. Not: [God knows every fact] \leftarrow [God knows every fact]. (From Irrefl.)
10. God does not exist. (From 1, 8, and 9.)

note: Whitcomb formulates his argument in terms of God knowing [Someone knows every fact], but doing so requires several extra steps and a more complicated premise instead of P4. I think it’s much cleaner to formulate things in terms of God knowing [God knows every fact].

Several ways of resisting this argument that I want to set aside as last-chance options:

- Denying P1. (It’d still be very interesting if this argument shows that God is not omniscient.)
- Denying P3. (Recall Fine on the counterintuitiveness of predicativism.)
- Denying P5. (We’ve already discussed P5’s plausibility, in §I above.)
- Denying Trans and Irrefl. (We’ve already discussed the prospects for rejecting these.)

This leaves two main options: (i) denying P2, and (ii) denying P4.

III. Whitcomb's Defense of P2

Why think P2 is true? Whitcomb takes it to follow from the following definition of omniscience:

(D1) To be omniscient is to know every fact.

Whitcomb replies to various objections to this definition:

- *objection #1*: When we have knowledge-that, what we know are *true propositions*, not *facts*.

reply: In that case, we can run a similar argument using the following instead of P2, P3, and P5:

(P2*) If God is omniscient, then God knows every true proposition.

(P3*) If p , then $\langle p \rangle$ is true.

(P5*) If S knows $\langle p \rangle$, then $[S \text{ knows } \langle p \rangle] \leftarrow [p]$.

- *objection #2*: D1 is wrong; a better definition of omniscience is

(D2) To be omniscient is to know every knowable fact.

reply #1: D2 renders the existence of omniscient beings compatible with the skeptical view that no beings whatsoever can know anything. That's very implausible.

reply #2: In order for D2 to block a version of the grounding argument, [God knows every knowable fact] must be unknowable. However, to claim, "God knows every knowable fact, but I do not know that God knows every knowable fact," is to advocate a Moorean absurdity.

[A similar reply works against the proposal "For S to be omniscient is for S to know every fact *that is knowable by S*." It'd be really weird if God is omniscient and although he cannot know this, we can.]

- *objection #3*: D1 is wrong; a better definition of omniscience is

(D3) To be omniscient is to believe all the true propositions.

reply: D3 lets omniscient beings believe all or many of the false propositions. That's implausible.

- *objection #4*: D1 is wrong; a better definition of omniscience is

(D4) To be omniscient is to believe all the true propositions and none of the falsehoods.

reply: D4 lets omniscient beings believe things for bad reasons. That's implausible.

counter-reply: Our reasons simply consist in our beliefs, and true beliefs cannot be bad reasons.

counter-counter-reply: It's not clear that our reasons consist only in our beliefs. And even if we grant that they do, it's possible for a true belief to function as a bad reason for another true belief. (Suppose a subject bases his belief in $\langle \text{Mars is a planet} \rangle$ on his belief in $\langle 1+1=2 \rangle$.)

- *objection #5*: D1 is wrong; a better definition of omniscience is

(D5) To be omniscient is to have a maximally justified belief in every true proposition.

reply #1: It's not clear that *there is* a maximal degree of justification.

reply #2: D5 doesn't capture the motivating thought behind taking God to omniscient, which is that if God exists, then he is epistemically perfect. In fact, we can run the grounding argument using the following two premises instead of P1 and P2:

(P1**) If God exists, then God is epistemically perfect.

(P2**) If God is epistemically perfect, then he knows every fact.

IV. Whitcomb's Defense of P4

Whitcomb's defense of P4 is less successful than his defense of P2. In fact, I think it's pretty clear that a theist should resist his argument by denying P4.

We can extract from Whitcomb's article three ways of arguing for the plausibility of P4:

- First, Whitcomb motivates P4 through examples of the following sort:

example: Suppose everyone loves Igor, and that Sam and Pat are among the people who exist. Then the following are very plausible:

[Everyone loves Igor] \leftarrow [Sam loves Igor].
 [Everyone loves Igor] \leftarrow [Pat loves Igor].
 [Everyone loves Igor] \leftarrow [Igor loves Igor].

- Second, Whitcomb motivates P4 by insisting that it is just as plausible as the following extremely plausible principle about grounding:

(P4') If $(\exists x)\varphi(x)$ and $\varphi(a)$, then $[(\exists x)\varphi(x)] \leftarrow [\varphi(a)]$.

- Finally, Whitcomb motivates P4 by defending it against the following objection:

objection: As Fine has argued in "Some Puzzles of Ground," P3, P4, Trans, Irrefl, and the following two principles are enough to generate a contradiction:

(P6) Every fact exists.

(P7) If $[p]$ exists, then $[[p]$ exists] $\leftarrow [p]$.

Since P4 is the least plausible of these six principles, we should reject P4.

Whitcomb's reply: We should reject P7 instead. It is motivated by the following two thoughts: (i) facts of the form $[x$ exists] are not brute, and (ii) what else could ground $[x$ exists] except x ? But this second thought is mistaken: [My computer exists] is not grounded by my computer.

All three of these ways of motivating P4 are unconvincing. In reverse order:

- Whitcomb's reply to the objection by way of P6 and P7 does not work. First, I don't see why P7 must be motivated via thought (ii). Second, if Whitcomb denies P7, then he owes us an explanation of what instead grounds $[[p]$ exists]. He tentatively proposes that we replace P7 with

(P7') If $[p]$ and $[[p]$ exists] both exist, then they have the same grounds.

However, we can generate a contradiction from P3, P4, P6, P7', and Irrefl. So we have not avoided the objection.

- If P4' is true, then by appealing to P4' along with P3, P5, Trans, and Irrefl, we can argue that it is impossible for the following to ever be true:

S knows [S knows something].

But surely it is possible to know that one knows something. This gives us reason to doubt P4', and by extension to doubt P4. (Both Sharon Berry and Tom Donaldson independently made this point to me over email.)

- The example involving the partial grounds of [Everyone loves Igor] does not generalize. This is plausibly a case of what Rosen calls *an accidental regularity*. A theist might accept that accidental regularities are partially grounded in their instances, but deny that it follows that all universal facts are partially grounded in their instances. In particular, the theist might hold that

[God knows every fact] \leftarrow [It lies in God's nature that God knows every fact].