Intuitions as Garden-Variety Counterfactual Judgments

I. Williamson's General Program

The basic idea: so-called appeals to intuition in philosophy are really just an application of our general cognitive capacity to handle counterfactual conditionals. Moreover, the epistemology of that cognitive capacity is completely unmysterious.

II. Williamson on the Structure of Gettier's Argument

Let us define the following predicates (where x is a variable ranging over people and p is a variable ranging over propositions):

$K(x, p) =_{df} x$ knows p

$JTB(x, p) =_{df} x$ has a justified true belief in p

$GC(x, p) =_{df} x$ is Gettier-related to the proposition p

Here is a recipe for obtaining $GC(x, p)$:

Take a Gettier-style story told in non-question-begging terms.

Replace all fictional singular terms ("Smith," "Jones," "that animal," etc.) with variables.

Replace the proposition in which the protagonist has a justified true belief with a variable.

We can formalize the *justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge* as follows:

(1) $\Box(\forall x)(\forall p)[K(x, p) \leftrightarrow JTB(x, p)]$

The *first premise* of Gettier's argument is that the Gettier case is possible: someone could stand in the relation described in the Gettier story with respect to some proposition. In symbols:

(2) $\Diamond(\exists x)(\exists p)[GC(x, p)]$

The *second premise* of Gettier's argument is (supposedly) that "if someone had stood as described to a proposition, then whoever stood as described to a proposition would have had justified true belief without knowledge in respect of that proposition" ("Armchair Philosophy...," p. 5). In symbols:

(3) $(\exists x)(\exists p)[GC(x, p)] \; \Box\!\!\rightarrow \; (\forall x)(\forall p)(GC(x, p) \rightarrow [JTB(x, p) \; \& \; \neg K(x, p)])$

Given some minimal assumptions about the modal logic of counterfactual conditionals, (2) and (3) entail the following:

(4) $\Diamond(\exists x)(\exists p)[JTB(x, p) \; \& \; \neg K(x, p)]$

Moreover, (4) is inconsistent with (1). So the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge is refuted.

Why the epistemology of this argument is (supposedly) completely unmysterious:

- No one doubts that we can know (2). (At least not in this context.)

- We have a general cognitive capacity to handle counterfactual conditionals whose general epistemic standing is not in dispute. Moreover, "we have no good reason to expect that the evaluation of 'philosophical' counterfactuals such as (3) uses radically different cognitive capacities from the evaluation of ordinary 'unphilosophical' counterfactuals" (p. 13). Thus, "we should not suppose (3) to raise fundamentally new questions of reliability" (pp. 14–15).

III. Doubts about the Second Premise

Objection #1: The following is a more plausible candidate for the second premise:

$$(3^*) \qquad \Box(\forall x)(\forall p)(GC(x, p) \rightarrow [JTB(x, p) \,\&\, \neg K(x, p)])$$

Reply #1: Philosophical examples are almost never described in complete detail. Moreover, some of these missing details are relevant to the philosophical matters at play.

> For example, "a subject with sufficiently awkward background beliefs who derives p from q would thereby lose justification for q rather than gaining it for p, even in cases like those Gettier described" (p. 6).

> "Any humanly compiled list of such interfering factors is likely to be incomplete" (pp. 6–7).

> Thus (3^*) is false, so it can't be the second premise of Gettier's argument.

Objection #2: The following is a more plausible candidate for the second premise:

$$(3^{**}) \qquad (\forall x)(\forall p)(GC(x, p) \;\Box\!\!\rightarrow\; [JTB(x, p) \,\&\, \neg K(x, p)])$$

After all, the following is best way to formulate the second premise in English:

> $(3^\dagger)$ If a subject was Gettier-related to a proposition, then he/she would have justified true belief in it without knowledge.

Moreover, just as (5^{**}) below is the best way of translating $(5^\dagger)$, so too is (3^{**}) the best way of translating $(3^\dagger)$.

> $(5^\dagger)$ If an animal escaped from the zoo, it would be a monkey.

> (5^{**}) $(\forall x)[(\text{Animal}(x) \,\&\, \text{Escaped}(x)) \;\Box\!\!\rightarrow\; \text{Monkey}(x)]$

Reply #2: But (5^{**}) is *not* an accurate translation of $(5^\dagger)$. For example, (5^{**}) implies of some specific elephant, Fred, that if he had escaped the zoo, then he would have been a monkey. Indeed, $(5^\dagger)$ is better translated as

> (5) $(\exists x)[\text{Animal}(x) \,\&\, \text{Escaped}(x)] \;\Box\!\!\rightarrow\; (\forall x)[(\text{Animal}(x) \,\&\, \text{Escaped}(x)) \rightarrow \text{Monkey}(x)]$

Similarly, (3^{**}) is not an accurate translation of $(3^\dagger)$, since (3^{**}) but not $(3^\dagger)$ is false under the following conditions: someone is actually Gettier-related to some proposition, but someone else is such that if he/she had been Gettier-related to the same proposition, one of the interfering factors would have been in place that made his/her belief in that proposition not justified.

Objection #3: Any way of cashing out the second premise of Gettier's argument in terms of counterfactual conditionals must be wrong, since the truth-value of a counterfactual conditional depends on which world is actual, but the soundness of Gettier's argument does not depend on which world is actual.

> For example, if it were actually the case that someone is Gettier-related to a proposition, but one of the interfering factors made it such that he/she is not justified in believing that proposition, (3) would turn out to be false. However, surely Gettier's argument is sound even in such a case.

Reply #3: Often purported counterexamples fail for accidental reasons and can easily be repaired.

IV. Doubts about Epistemic Standing of the First Premise

When we are considering the Gettier scenarios, our knowledge of (2) is usually not in doubt.

However, for other philosophical thought experiments (for example: trumping cases involving magic spells, or cases of fission/fusion from the personal identity literature), the epistemic standing of (the analogue of) (2) does seem up for debate.

Three ways of defining necessity and possibility in terms of counterfactual conditionals:

1. □A ↔ (¬A □→ ⊥)   [where ⊥ is any contradiction]
    ◇A ↔ ¬(A □→ ⊥)

2. □A ↔ (¬A □→ A)
    ◇A ↔ ¬(A □→ ¬A)

3. □A ↔ (∀p)(p □→ A)
    ◇A ↔ ¬(∀p)(p □→ ¬A)

Thus by starting with the counterfactual conditional, we can build up a theory of metaphysical necessity and possibility.

Williamson's suggestion is that we take these equivalences to constitute *definitions* of metaphysical necessity and possibility, thereby assimilating our ability to make alethic modal judgments into our more general ability to make counterfactual judgments.

Moreover, once we think of our faculty for evaluating metaphysical necessity and possibility as just one part of our more general faculty for evaluating counterfactual conditionals, any epistemic worries about the deliverances of the former faculty supposedly dissolve:

> "The epistemology of metaphysical modality requires no dedicated faculty of intuition. It is simply a special case of the epistemology of counterfactual thinking, a kind of thinking tightly integrated with our thinking about the spatio-temporal world. To deny that such thinking ever yields knowledge is to fall into an extravagant skepticism" ("Philosophical Knowledge…," p. 120).

(Note that once Williamson has made this move, then any squabbling about the proper logical form of the second premise of Gettier's argument is beside the point, since any proposal will now be equivalent to one formulated purely in terms of counterfactual conditions and non-modal constituents.)

V. Doubts about Epistemic Standing of the Second Premise

Suppose we grant to Williamson that appeals to (so-called) philosophical intuition really just involve an application of our more general faculty for making counterfactual judgments.

And suppose we grant to Williamson that there is no need to defend the epistemic standing of judgments such as the following:

- "If you had looked out of the window just then, you would have seen a blue jay fly past."

- "If the rock had fallen five seconds later, it would have hit me."

- "If twelve people had come to the party, more than eleven people would have come to the party."

Why, though, should we then follow him in thinking that there is no need to defend the epistemic standing of distinctively philosophical counterfactual judgments such as the following?

- "If you had been Gettier-related to that proposition, then you would have had a justified true belief in that proposition that wasn't knowledge."

- "If those young hoodlums had poured gasoline on that cat and ignited it, then they would have done something morally impermissible."

- "If one event were a cause of a second event, which in turn was a cause of a third, then it would be the case that the first event is a cause of the third."

- "If it were the case that a (philosophical) zombie exists, then it would be the case that a contradiction is true."

Just because we recruit our faculty for evaluating counterfactuals in making these latter judgments, this doesn't (by itself) mean that we don't use any other faculty when doing so.

>   (Also, one might think that talk of faculties is beside the point, epistemologically speaking: as Kagan pointed out, the issue of whether we are entitled to trust our moral intuitions seems orthogonal to the issue of whether there is a dedicated faculty for moral judgment.)

Also, just because we recruit our faculty for evaluating counterfactuals in making these judgments, this doesn't (by itself) mean that the epistemology of these judgments is completely subsumed by the epistemology of counterfactual judgments in general.

>   It's not like someone who is worried about the epistemology of beliefs about the nature of God would be completely unworried about the epistemology of counterfactual judgments about God, or that someone who is worried about the epistemology of mathematics would be completely unworried about the epistemology of mathematical counterfactuals.

So it seems crucial to Williamson's case that we cannot "excise without loss" our ability to make philosophical counterfactual judgments from our ability to make garden-variety counterfactual judgments.

>   In "Philosophical Knowledge and Knowledge of Counterfactuals," Williamson provides a sketch of how we might evaluate at least some counterfactuals: "the thinker imaginatively supposes the antecedent and counterfactually develops the supposition, adding further judgments within the supposition by reasoning, off-line predictive mechanisms, and other off-line judgments" (p. 103).

>   But the way in which this proposal works for distinctively philosophical counterfactuals seems *completely different* from the way it works for garden-variety counterfactuals.

Williamson rejects the following reasons for sorting the distinctively philosophical counterfactuals in a different epistemic category from garden-variety counterfactuals:

- Distinctively philosophical counterfactuals involve a necessary connection between the antecedent and consequent.

- To deny distinctively philosophical counterfactuals is to exhibit linguistic incompetence.

- Distinctively philosophical counterfactuals are *a priori*; garden-variety counterfactuals are *a posteriori*.

But these all seem like straw men. How about the following proposal instead:

- Distinctively philosophical counterfactuals involve distinctively philosophical concepts such as <knowledge>, <causation>, <moral permissibility>, etc.

During his discussion of why some "philosophical" counterfactuals are *a posteriori*, Williamson notes that Gettier could have instead constructed a real-life Getter case and argued on this basis that knowledge is not justified true belief.

>   Williamson seems to think that the consideration of actual examples helps his case, but it doesn't.

>   Consider a case in which I actually witness some action and think to myself, "That was wrong."

>   Surely if we are worried about the epistemic standing of moral judgments about hypothetical cases, we will be just as worried about the epistemic standing of the moral judgment I just made about this actual case.

>   But since I am making a judgment about an actual (i.e. non-counterfactual) case, there is no need for me to employ my faculty for making counterfactual judgments.

>   Therefore, the epistemology of particular-case moral judgments cannot be a special case of the epistemology of counterfactual judgments.