25. Williamson 2000: The good-/bad-case asymmetry

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I. Symmetry?

The **Good Case:** things are as they appear with respect to p.
It appears that p, you (justifiably) believe it, and in fact p is true.

E.g. p = *you have hands*.

The **Bad Case:** a skeptical scenario in which things aren't as they appear with respect to p.
It appears that p, you (justifiably) believe it, but in fact p is false.

E.g. you're a BIV.

Williamson: Why think that the possibility of the Bad Case means that you don't know that p even in the Good Case?

(Compare: does the possibility that p is false in the Bad Case imply that your belief isn't *safe* in the good case? Uncontroversially, no! So long as, in the Good Case, you couldn't easily have been in the Bad Case.)

The best answer, he thinks:

P1 You have the *same evidence* in the Good Case and the Bad Case.
P2 You don't know that p in the Bad Case.
P3 What you can know depends only on your evidence.
C Therefore, you don't know that p in the Good Case.

Uncontroversial, since p is false.

A form of evidentialism.

Williamson accepts P2 and P3; he denies P1.

II. Asymmetry?

The non-skeptic is committed to an asymmetry.

- Agrees that in the Bad Case (b), for all you know you're in the Good case (g).
- But is committed to thinking that in the Good Case (g), your knowledge rules out the Bad Case (b).
  $\Rightarrow$ So they thinks there's a knowledge asymmetry:

After all, that's how things *appear*.

$$\circlearrowleft b \longrightarrow g \circlearrowright$$

First point: such an asymmetry is perfectly *coherent*.

Kp is true at w iff all worlds left open by your evidence are p-worlds.
But there could be an *evidence*-asymmetry:

At g, the set of worlds left open by your evidence is $\{g\}$.
So Kg and $K\neg b$ and KKg are true.

At b, the set of worlds left open by your evidence is $\{b, g\}$.
So $\neg K\neg g$ and $\neg K\neg b$ and $\neg K\neg Kg$ are true.

III. An argument for symmetry

The skeptic's argument implicitly rests on a premise like:

Luminosity: You're always in a position to know which worlds are left open by your evidence.

Luminosity entails that you have the same evidence in both *b* and *g*:

Given the uncontroversial premise that at *b*, for all you know you're at *g*.

1) Suppose (for *reductio*) that at *g* your evidence rules out *b*.
2) At *b*, your evidence doesn't rule out *b*.
3) Therefore, at *b* you can't know whether (i) your evidence leaves open *b*, or instead (ii) your evidence rules out *b*.
   But that contradicts Luminosity!

C So (1) is false: at *g*, your evidence leaves open *b*.

IV. A reductio of the argument's premise

But, Williamson says, Luminosity is false. You *can't* always know which worlds are left open by your evidence.

Intuition: As your evidence gradually changes, you can't always know exactly what it leaves open and rules out.

Imagine $t_0, t_1, ...t_n$ are moments at 1-millisecond intervals as you watch a sunrise.

At t_0, it's pitch black: your evidence rules out the possibility that it appears sunny (A_{Sun}).

At t_n it's blindingly bright: your evidence does *not* rule out the possibility that it appears sunny.

In fact, it *entails* A_{Sun}.

An obviously-true premise, says Williamson:

Margin for Error: If you can *know* p at t_i, then it must be *true* at t_{i+1}.

If not true at t_{i+1}, your belief isn't safe!

But Luminosity is inconsistent with Margin for Error:

1) Suppose (for *reductio*) that Luminosity is true.
2-a) At t_0, your evidence rules out A_{Sun}.
2-b) By Luminosity, at t_0 you *know* your evidence rules out A_{Sun}.
3-a) By Margin for Error, at $\boldsymbol{t_1}$ your evidence rules out A_{Sun}.
3-b) By Luminosity, at t_1 you *know* your evidence rules out A_{Sun}.
4-a) By Margin for Error, at $\boldsymbol{t_2}$ your evidence rules out A_{Sun}.

...

Iterating, we get the conclusion that at $\boldsymbol{t_n}$, your evidence rules out A_{Sun}. But that's false! So Luminosity must be false.[-0.3cm]

Or Margin for Error. But, Williamson says, MfE is obviously true.

V. Now what?

The skeptic's argument hinges on the assumption P1 that you have the same evidence in the Good Case and the Bad Case.

That assumption was in turn driven by the Luminosity assumption, that you can always know exactly what your evidence is.

But it should be uncontroversial that Luminosity is false!

⇒ Since you *can't* always know what your evidence is, we are free to assert an evidential asymmetry between the Good Case and the Bad.

Diagnosis:

- Skepticism hinges on assuming *too much* (self-)knowledge, i.e. too much knowledge of what our evidence is.
- If we give up the idea that there's a Luminous "cognitive home" that's *always* accessible, we realize that often the things *most* accessible to us—the things we know best—are things *outside* our heads.
- Once we do, we are free to say that our evidence is different than the evidence we'd have if we were in the Bad Case—even though, in the Bad Case, we wouldn't be able to recognize that difference.

References

Williamson, Timothy, 2000. *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.