

# DISCUSSION NOTES

## KNOWLEDGE AND WAYS OF KNOWING

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Quassim Cassam (2007a) offers a conception of ways of knowing which he argues is preferable to rival accounts such as the account we find in Williamson (2000). The correct way to think about ways of knowing matters for philosophers, such as Cassam and Williamson, who want to understand knowledge itself in terms of ways of knowing. So is Cassam right that his conception of ways of knowing is preferable to Williamson's? The discussion to follow is irenic in spirit: I will argue that in fact Cassam and Williamson don't offer competing accounts of the *same* phenomenon, but consistent accounts of subtly *different* phenomena. It is then open that ways of knowing in *both* senses are relevant to elucidating knowledge itself.

### I

*Introduction.* The notion of a way of knowing is treated by some as central to understanding what knowledge itself *is*, for instance:

[I]f one knows that *A*, then there is a specific way in which one knows; one can see or remember or ... that *A*. ... We may say that knowing that *A* is seeing or remembering or ... that *A*, if the list is understood as open-ended, and the concept *knows* is not identified with the disjunctive concept. (Williamson 2000, p. 33)

[T]o know that *P* is to be in a state that one can get into in any number of different ways, for example, by seeing that *P*, hearing that *P*, reading that *P*, calculating that *P*, and so on. (Cassam 2009b, p. 117)

In the developments of their views, Williamson and Cassam seem to present competing accounts of what ways of knowing are. And Cassam presents his account as a rival account. But I'll argue that we are offered consistent accounts of subtly different phenomena.

## II

*Cassam on Ways of Knowing.* Cassam (2007a) offers what he calls an *explanatory conception* of ways of knowing. As a first attempt at formulating this, Cassam says that ‘ $\phi$ -ing that  $P$  is a way of knowing that  $P$  just if it is possible satisfactorily to explain how  $S$  knows that  $P$  by pointing out that  $S \phi$ s that  $P$ ’ (2007a, p. 340). For example, suppose I know that fuel costs have risen because I read it in the newspaper. Here, reading that fuels costs have risen is my way of knowing, and this is because pointing out that I read that fuel costs have risen provides a satisfactory explanation of my knowledge. But for Cassam, there is no requirement that ways of knowing be propositional attitudes. Consider a case where in response to the question of how one knows that the cigarette lighter is under the desk one’s response is, ‘I can see it’ (p. 346). In this case what one specifies as one’s way of knowing—seeing the lighter—is, Cassam says, ‘not a propositional attitude’ (p. 347). The explanatory conception of ways of knowing, Cassam tells us, has

no particular interest in defending the idea that ways of knowing must be propositional attitudes. Indeed, it takes the cigarette lighter dialogue as showing why such a claim would be indefensible. When it comes to what counts as a way of knowing the explanatory conception is pretty relaxed. The most that it insists on is that ways of knowing are expressible by sentences of the form ‘ $S$  verbs’. (Cassam 2007a, p. 347)

A further feature of the explanatory conception of ways of knowing is that it doesn’t require explanations of knowledge to be entailing explanations. On an entailing conception of explanation,  $A$  (the *explanans*) explains  $B$  (the *explanandum*) only if  $A$  entails  $B$ . But, Cassam notes, in general we don’t intuitively require explanations to be entailing explanations (2008, p. 40). And we don’t intuitively require specifically epistemic explanations to be entailing explanations. Cassam suggests that, in understanding ways of knowing, on an explanatory conception of ways of knowing,

entailment is a double irrelevance; for a sentence of the form ‘ $S$  verbs that  $P$ ’ [or ‘ $S$  verbs \_\_\_’] to provide a satisfactory response to ‘How does  $S$  know that  $P$ ?’ it is neither necessary nor sufficient that ‘ $S$  verbs that  $P$ ’ [or ‘ $S$  verbs \_\_\_’] entails ‘ $S$  knows that  $P$ ’. (Cassam 2007a, p. 346)

We don't think that entailment is necessary for explanation in these epistemological contexts, for, as we observed above, one can explain how they know that the lighter is under the desk by pointing out that they can see the lighter under the desk. But 'S sees that lighter under the desk' doesn't, we think, entail 'S knows that the lighter is under the desk'. And entailment is not sufficient for explanation in these contexts. The simplest way to see this is that trivially 'S knows that  $p$ ' entails 'S knows that  $p$ ', but the former doesn't *explain* the latter (Cassam 2007a, pp. 339–40).

Considerations such as these help us to see why the explanatory conception of ways of knowing not only doesn't, but intuitively shouldn't embed an entailing conception of explanation. Though it is consistent with this that some ways of knowing *do* entail knowledge. It is even consistent with this general point that for some ways of knowing which do entail knowledge, the fact that they entail knowledge is relevant to them being explanatory. But we shouldn't *expect* the fact that some way of knowing is knowledge-entailing to have anything to do with its knowledge-explaining role.

How does this view of ways of knowing compare to the view offered by Williamson (2000)?

### III

*Williamson on Ways of Knowing.* Williamson's view of ways of knowing emerges in his discussion of a 'modest' proposal he makes about knowledge, namely, 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, p. 34). But what is a 'factive stative attitude'? Williamson explains this notion in the following way:

A propositional attitude is factive if and only if, necessarily, one has it only to truths [e.g. seeing that  $p$ ] ... Not all factive attitudes constitute states; forgetting is a process. Call those attitudes which constitute states *stative*. (Williamson 2000, p. 34)

So  $\phi$ -ing that  $p$  is a factive stative attitude to  $p$  if and only if  $\phi$ -ing that  $p$  is a propositional attitude which constitutes a state, and which is such that necessarily, if  $S \phi$ s that  $p$ , then  $p$ . Moreover, this analysis applies only to those  $\phi$ s which are semantically unanalysable—a  $\phi$

which is ‘not synonymous with any complex expression whose meaning is composed of the meanings of its parts’ (Williamson 2000, p. 34). This means that ‘believes truly’ doesn’t count as a factive stative attitude for Williamson, since it is semantically analysable.

But what has this got to do with ways of knowing? Well, in explicating the proposal, in the following passage, Williamson introduces an idea about ways of knowing:

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 .... Although that specific colour may happen to lack a name in our language, we could always introduce such a name, perhaps pointing to the thing as a paradigm. We may say that being coloured is being red or green or ..., if the list is understood as open-ended, and the concept *is coloured* is not identified with the disjunctive concept. One can grasp the concept *is coloured* without grasping the concept *is green*, therefore without grasping the disjunctive concept. Similarly, if one knows that *A*, then there is a specific way in which one knows; one can see or remember or ... that *A*. Although that specific way may happen to lack a name in our language, we could always introduce such a name, perhaps pointing to the case as a paradigm. We may say that knowing that *A* is seeing or remembering or ... that *A*, if the list is understood as open-ended, and the concept *knows* is not identified with the disjunctive concept. One can grasp the concept *knows* without grasping the concept *sees*, therefore without grasping the disjunctive concept. (Williamson 2000, p. 34)

Cassam (2007a, pp. 347–51) takes this passage as a focal point in his discussion of Williamson’s view of ways of knowing. I want to discuss how Cassam understands this passage, and how he compares Williamson’s view of ways of knowing to his own.

As Cassam notes, what Williamson suggests in this passage is that ‘seeing that *P* is a “way” of knowing in something like the sense in which red is a “way” of being coloured’ (Cassam 2007a, p. 348). In general, the passage suggests that specific ways of knowing are related to knowing in a similar way to how specific ways of being coloured are related to being coloured. This has the consequence that ways of knowing must entail knowledge, as Cassam explains:

Being red wouldn't count as a way of being coloured if it were not the case that 'X is red' entails 'X is coloured'. By the same token,  $\phi$ -ing that  $P$  wouldn't count as what Williamson calls a 'way of knowing' that  $P$  if it were not the case that ' $S \phi$ s that  $P$ ' entails ' $S$  knows that  $P$ '. (Cassam 2007a, p. 348)

Yet as we have seen, on Cassam's explanatory conception,  $\phi$ -ing can be a way of knowing even if it doesn't entail knowledge. So in this respect Williamson's conception of ways of knowing is more restrictive than Cassam's is. And as Cassam (2007a, p. 349) goes on to note, Williamson's view is more restrictive in two further ways. First, on Williamson's view ways of knowing must be propositional attitudes, and second, they must be states. As we've seen, on the explanatory conception ways of knowing need not be propositional attitudes. Seeing the lighter can be a way of knowing that it is under the desk, but it isn't a propositional attitude. And Cassam also thinks that we shouldn't restrict ways of knowing to states:

'By proving it' or 'By working it out' will be acceptable answers to 'How do you know that  $P$ ?' even though 'prove' and 'work out' aren't stative. Proving that  $P$  can be a way of knowing that  $P$ , at least as far as the explanatory conception is concerned. (Cassam 2007a, p. 349)

According to Cassam, we have an explanatory conception of ways of knowing and Williamson's conception of ways of knowing. These are, as Cassam (2007a, p. 339) puts it, 'rival conceptions' of ways of knowing. The question, then, is which conception looks more plausible? Cassam thinks that the explanatory conception is more plausible. For in being *less* restrictive it allows us to count states or processes as ways of knowing which we intuitively think are ways of knowing but which Williamson's account of ways of knowing, in being *more* restrictive, can't count as ways of knowing. Unlike on Williamson's conception, the explanatory conception doesn't exclude processes from being ways of knowing, nor does it exclude non-propositional mental states, nor does it exclude states or processes which don't entail knowledge. That it *doesn't* exclude such states or processes is, Cassam suggests, a point in favour of the explanatory conception over Williamson's conception.

But is this way of understanding Williamson's view the best way to understand it? As we've seen, Cassam thinks that his own explanatory account of ways of knowing is preferable to what he takes to be Williamson's account of that same sort of phenomena. But we

should also note that by Cassam's lights there is a more severe criticism of Williamson's account. At one point Cassam says,

This is not to deny that reading that *P* can be a way of knowing that *P*. Any sane account of ways of knowing had better accept that, for example, it is possible for one to know that Quine was born in Akron by reading his autobiography. (Cassam 2007a, p. 344)

Now since on Cassam's understanding of Williamson's view, reading that *p* doesn't count as a way of knowing—since reading that *p* is not a factive stative attitude to *p*—Williamson's account of ways of knowing is, by implication of what Cassam says in the above passage, not sane. So the situation we find ourselves in is that if we interpret Williamson as putting forward an account of the sort of phenomena that Cassam is also trying to account for, the result is not just that Williamson's account is less plausible than the explanatory account, but it is not even a sane account. Now surely, if we want to be charitable, we should at least consider the possibility that Williamson is not putting forward an 'insane' account of ways of knowing.

I will now argue that Williamson and Cassam are not giving competing accounts of the same phenomenon, but consistent accounts of subtly different phenomena.

#### IV

*A Merely Apparent Disagreement?* Is Williamson's account of 'specific ways of knowing' even *supposed* to be an account of the phenomenon—ways of knowing—that Cassam is interested in? The labels Cassam and Williamson use are the same, but is it the same phenomenon they are interested in? If not, then taking it to be an account of a phenomenon it is not supposed to be an account of may well yield a result which is not sane. But that would be no criticism of Williamson's account *properly understood*.

The fact that both Cassam and Williamson use the label 'ways of knowing' is not at all decisive here. For Williamson drops the label in his subsequent more substantive discussion of factive stative attitudes (2000, pp. 34–41). And in any case his use of 'specific ways of knowing' terminology is not essential to the formulation of his claims in the passage where that phrase does occur. Williamson also puts things in this way:

While belief aims at knowledge, various mental processes aim at more specific factive mental states. Perception aims at perceiving that something is so; memory aims at remembering that something is so. Since knowing is the most general factive mental state, all such processes aim at kinds of knowledge. (Williamson 2000, p. 48)

Here Williamson puts things in terms of ‘specific factive mental states’, and ‘kinds of knowledge’. He might also put things in terms of specific realizations of knowledge. And what Cassam says with his use of the expression ‘ways of knowing’ could be faithfully reformulated in the terminology of ‘means of knowing’ (in other work Cassam uses this terminology instead: see Cassam 2007b, 2009a).

I think the idea that Cassam and Williamson are interested in the same phenomenon is questionable. I will try to bring this out by describing how we might consistently think that there are specific ways of knowing in Williamson’s sense, accounted for in Williamson’s way, *and* ways of knowing in Cassam’s sense, accounted for in Cassam’s way (with the explanatory conception).

It seems to me that Williamson is putting forward two central ideas: (1) states of knowing that *p* always have more specific realizations, and (2) the more specific realizations of knowledge are factive stative attitudes. So the sense in which some factive stative attitudes count as ‘specific ways of knowing’ for Williamson is that they are specific realizations of knowing that *p*. This is similar to how seeing *x*, hearing *x*, and so on, count as *ways of perceiving x*—they are specific realizations of perceiving *x*. Suppose then that I know that the lemon before me is yellow. For Williamson, applying (1) and (2), this means that my state of knowledge is realized in a more specific way, and what constitutes this realization is that I  $\phi$  that the lemon before me is yellow, for some  $\phi$  which is a more specific factive stative attitude to the relevant proposition—more specific, that is, than knowing.

Let’s develop the case a bit more. Suppose then that we consider *how* I know that the lemon before me is yellow. And suppose that a correct and satisfactory answer to this question is that I can *see the lemon*. In perfectly legitimate terms, the *way I know* that the lemon before me is yellow is by seeing the lemon. Let’s also add to this story an account: the reason that my seeing the lemon counts as a way of knowing is that it satisfactorily *explains how* I know. At this stage we have invoked a way of knowing in Cassam’s *sense*, in the sense in which Cassam understands that phenomenon. Moreover,

we have added Cassam's *account* of the phenomenon to the mix.

Now, the crucial question is, in introducing these details have we introduced an inconsistency? No. Williamson can say that I know that the lemon before me is yellow by seeing the lemon. In this sense he can admit that seeing the lemon is my way of knowing. But he will add to this that my knowledge must have a more specific realization, in the form of some factive stative attitude more specific than knowledge, that is, it must be knowledge had in some more 'specific way'.

There are two notions of 'ways of knowing' in play here. To avoid ambiguity we can put things like this: there is the means by which I know—seeing the lemon—and then there is the specific realization of my knowledge—for Williamson, some factive state of the form  $\phi$ -ing that the lemon before me is yellow. The means by which I know is the 'way of knowing' in Cassam's sense, and we are, for all we've said here, free to give an explanatory account of that. And the specific realization of my knowledge is the 'way of knowing' in Williamson's sense, and we are, for all we've said here, free to give an account of that in Williamson's terms, that is, in terms of factive stative attitudes.

In the case described, the specific realization of my knowledge might be a matter of my *seeing that the lemon before me is yellow*. Accordingly, I see the lemon, and the conditions are such that, in seeing the lemon I get into the state of seeing *that* the lemon before me is yellow. This factive stative attitude is—on Williamson's account—a specific realization of knowing that the lemon before me is yellow. Alternatively, it might be that seeing the lemon gives rise to a different specific factive stative attitude, one which, perhaps, we have no natural language expression for. All Williamson is committed to is that there is *some such* factive stative attitude which constitutes a specific realization of knowing that the lemon before me is yellow. And this, on the way I've been presenting things, doesn't seem to be inconsistent with admitting that there are also ways of knowing in Cassam's sense—what we can call means of knowing—which are accounted for in terms of Cassam's explanatory conception.

Another case. Suppose I know that there is a railway strike going on. Now consider *how* I know this. And suppose that a correct, and satisfactory answer to this question is that *the transport official told me that such a strike is happening*. That the official told me that



there is a strike going on is my way of knowing that such a strike is happening. Let's also add to this story an account: the reason that the official's telling me that there is a strike going on is a way of knowing that there is a strike going on is that it—that testimony—satisfactorily *explains how* I know. At this stage we have invoked a way of knowing in Cassam's *sense*. Moreover, we have added Cassam's *account* of the phenomenon to the mix.

Is there anything here which is inconsistent with Williamson's position? No. Williamson can say that I know that there is a railway strike going on by being told that there is a railway strike going on. In this sense he can admit that being told that there is a strike going on is a way of knowing. But he will add to this that my knowledge must have a more specific realization, in the form of some factive stative attitude more specific than knowledge.

There are two notions of 'ways of knowing' in play here, and to avoid ambiguity we can put things like this: there is the means by which I know—being told that there is a strike going on—and then there is the specific realization of my knowledge—for Williamson, some factive state of the form  $\phi$ -ing that there is a strike going on. The means by which I know is the 'way of knowing' in Cassam's sense, and we are, for all we've said here, free to give an explanatory account of that. And the specific realization of my knowledge is the 'way of knowing' in Williamson's sense, and we are, for all we've said here, free to give an account of that in Williamson's terms.

In the case currently under discussion, the specific realization of my knowledge, on Williamson's account, can't be my being *told* that there is a railway strike going on. Since being told that  $p$  is, obviously, not *factive* (the same goes for reading that  $p$ ). But all Williamson needs to say is that when I know that  $p$  by being told that  $p$ , there is *some such* factive stative attitude which constitutes a specific realization of knowing that  $p$ . It is, admittedly, difficult to say what specific state that might be in this sort of case. However, Williamson admits that a 'specific way', which constitutes a realization of knowledge, 'may lack a name in our language' (2000, p. 34). So it is open for him to say that the difficulty we have of stating what the specific realization of knowing that  $p$  is, when such knowledge is acquired by means of being told that  $p$ , just indicates that such specific realizations lack a name in our language.

We can admit that in some cases where  $S$  knows that  $p$ , what counts as  $S$ 's way of knowing—in Cassam's sense, and given Cas-

sam's account—is also what constitutes the specific realization of *S*'s knowledge—given Williamson's account of that. For instance, suppose that *S* knows that she locked the door when she left the house because she can remember that she locked the door when she left the house. Suppose this is a matter of *S*'s remembering that she locked the door when she left *explaining how* she knows that she locked the door when she left the house. To say that *S* knows that *p* because she can remember that *p* is to give a satisfactory explanation of how *S* knows, in that it explains how *S* retains her knowledge in terms of a specific faculty, memory, whose function (or a function which it has) is that of knowledge retention. It is consistent with this that *S*'s remembering that she locked the door when she left the house is also the specific way in which *S* knows that she locked the door when she left the house, in *Williamson's* sense. That is, it is consistent with this that *S*'s remembering that she locked the door when she left the house is what constitutes the specific realization of *S*'s knowledge that she locked the door when she left the house.

I have been trying to suggest that there is an alternative way of construing Williamson's remarks, on which he is not putting forward a rival (and by Cassam's lights insane) account of ways, *means*, of knowing. Instead he is putting forward an account of the nature of specific realizations of knowledge. I have tried to suggest that the following claims are consistent: (1) states of knowledge—of knowing that *p*—always have more specific realizations, (2) the more specific realizations of knowledge are factive stative attitudes, (3) there are ways of knowing in Cassam's sense, and (4) those ways of knowing—what I prefer to call means of knowing—can be accounted for, qua means of knowing, in terms of Cassam's explanatory conception. The potential for confusion arises not least because the distinct phenomena are related: a way of knowing in one sense can give rise to a way of knowing in the other sense. But also the potential for confusion arises because the label 'ways of knowing' can apply, legitimately, to each phenomenon, means of knowing and realizations of knowledge.

I am *not* claiming that (1) and (2) are true—which is tantamount to endorsing the Williamsonian account of knowledge. We may well want to reject these claims; the point is just that this strikes me as being independent of the issue of how to account for means of knowing—ways of knowing in Cassam's sense.

## V

*Conclusion.* The notion of a way of knowing is central to some key work in contemporary epistemology. Authors such as Williamson and Cassam each seek to elucidate knowledge (what knowledge is) by reference to ways of knowing. But when one delves further into the views of these authors, there seems to be disagreement between them. Cassam construes the disagreement in this way: there is a single phenomenon—ways of knowing—about which they disagree. The disagreement takes the form of rival accounts of that phenomenon. But I've argued that this is not the way to look at the matter. Rather, Cassam and Williamson are giving consistent accounts of subtly different phenomena: means of knowing and specific realizations of knowledge.

I am not claiming that there is no difference between, or potential for disagreement concerning, the views of *knowledge* offered by Williamson and Cassam. After all, Cassam attempts to elucidate knowledge in terms of *means of knowing*, whereas Williamson attempts to elucidate knowledge in terms of *specific realizations of knowledge*. But it is not implausible to suppose that there are both means of knowing and specific realizations of knowledge. So perhaps an account of knowledge might be developed in terms of *both* means of knowing and specific realizations of knowledge (and the relations between them). Whether that is possible, and quite how it should be done, I leave for another occasion.<sup>1</sup>

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