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*Against Knowledge-First Epistemology*

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**Abstract:** I begin by criticizing *reductionist* knowledge-first epistemology according to which knowledge can be used to reductively analyze other epistemic phenomena. My central concern is that proponents of such an approach commit a similar mistake to the one that they charge their opponents with. This is the mistake of seeking to reductively analyze basic epistemic phenomena in terms of other allegedly more fundamental phenomena. I then turn to *non-reductionist* brands of knowledge-first epistemology. Specifically, I consider the knowledge norms of assertion and contrast them with an alternative that I have developed elsewhere (Gerken 2011, 2012a, 2013b, 2014, 2015a, 2015c, *MS*). On the basis of the critical discussion, I question whether a knowledge-first program that is both plausible and distinctive has been identified. On a more positive note, I sketch the contours of an alternative that I label ‘equilibristic epistemology.’ According to this approach, there isn’t a single epistemic phenomenon or concept that is “first.” Rather, there are a number of basic epistemic phenomena that are not reductively analyzable although they may be co-elucidated in a non-reductive manner. This approach preserves some grains of truth in knowledge-first epistemology. For example, it preserves the idea that knowledge can be taken to be explanatorily basic and unanalyzable. However, since no single epistemic phenomenon is first, knowledge is not first.

**1. Introduction.** After some preliminary discussion of the nature of knowledge-first epistemology, I argue that reductive knowledge-first epistemologists commit a mistake similar to the one with which they charge their opponents. This is the mistake of seeking to reductively analyze basic epistemic phenomena in terms of other allegedly more fundamental phenomena. I then turn to non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology and argue that it fails in its application to epistemic norms of action and assertion. Knowledge norms of assertion and action have been thought to exemplify the virtues the knowledge-first approach (Williamson 2000, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). So, if this instance of knowledge-first epistemology is problematic, it raises general doubts about the program.

To conclude on a positive note, I return to the methodological level and outline the contours of an alternative “equilibristic methodology.” It has it that a number of core epistemic and doxastic phenomena are so interrelated that they cannot be reductively analyzable although they may be co-analyzed non-reductively. Thus, I suggest that there isn’t a single epistemic phenomenon, word or concept that is “first.” Rather, several core epistemic phenomena are (roughly) equally explanatorily basic. This approach preserves some grains of truth in knowledge-first epistemology: The idea that knowledge is not reductively analyzable in terms of more basic epistemic phenomena as well as the idea that knowledge is explanatorily basic. However, it denies that knowledge is most explanatorily basic. Since no single epistemic phenomenon is first, knowledge is not first.

**1.2. Terminology and notation.** I use the term ‘warrant’ as the genus for non-factive epistemic rationality. I use ‘entitlement’ for an externalist species of warrant and ‘justification’ for internalist species of it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This terminology clashes with other uses. Often ‘justification’ is used in a sense similar to my use of ‘warrant.’ Moreover, Williamson and others use ‘warrant’ as “a term of art, for that evidential property (if any) which plays the role of property C in the correct simple account of assertion” (Williamson 2000: 243). The property C, in turn, marks the epistemic position required by assertion (Williamson 2000: 241ff). Such terminological clashes are irksome but almost unavoidable. To minimize terminological confusion, I sometimes take the liberty to use my preferred terminology in paraphrasing and discussing views articulated with other terminologies.

I will mainly discuss knowledge itself. But where it is necessary to discuss words or concepts, I will mention with single quotes and underlining, respectively. For example, the word ‘knowledge’ typically expresses the concept knowledge. On occasion, I use the phrase ‘the phenomenon of knowledge’ to refer to knowledge itself in a somewhat neutral manner. Thus, the phrase is *not* intended to suggest the *appearance* of knowledge. Rather, I use the phrase to avoid begging questions as the nature of knowledge. I will use phrases such as ‘epistemic phenomena’ in a similar manner.

**2. Characterizing knowledge-first epistemology.** I will begin by considering some characterizations of the knowledge-first program. It will transpire that it is not trivial to characterize a knowledge-first program that is worthy of distinction.

**2.1. Inadequate characterizations of knowledge-first epistemology.** A good number of the broad theses and methodological stances that knowledge-first epistemologists hold dear fail to constitute a distinctive knowledge-first epistemology. The reason for this is that almost everyone holds these broad theses and stances dear. Indeed, ardent foes of knowledge-first epistemology, such as myself, accept many of them. This point is not trivial because knowledge-first epistemology is sometimes motivated by presupposing that opposition to it is in tension with the broad theses and methodological stances in question. But knowledge-first epistemologists and their opponents should agree that such a motivation is misguided. Opponents should reject it because it is a straw man argument. Proponents should reject it because it is a straw man argument. Moreover, proponents should reject it because the substantive core of the knowledge-first agenda may drown in overly programmatic appeal to theses and stances that almost everyone accepts. I will not include all of the theses and methodological stances figuring in the literature. Likewise, I will avoid exegesis. Rather, I will discuss a few representative ideas.

Knowledge-first epistemology is not merely subscription to the thesis that knowledge cannot be given a reductive analysis. If it were so, a philosopher who harbors general skepticism about reductive analyses would *ipso facto* be a knowledge-first epistemologist. Likewise, knowledge-first epistemology must be more than the claim that knowledge is a *primitive* epistemic concept or phenomenon. For someone who regards a wide range of epistemic concepts or phenomena as primitive may not be a knowledge-first epistemologist. Indeed, this is the equilibristic view that I develop in Section 5. Furthermore, knowledge-first epistemology is not merely the contention that knowledge is *central* to epistemology. If this were the case, most epistemologists (before and after Williamson’s inauguration of knowledge-first epistemology) should be categorized as a knowledge-first epistemologists. Finally, knowledge-first epistemology is not merely the idea that the word ‘knowledge’ is *central* to our folk epistemological talk or that the concept knowledge is central to our epistemological thought. These ideas are also accepted by most epistemologists – including opponents of knowledge-first epistemology (Gerken 2015a, MS).

The theses mentioned are examples of ideas so weak and so widespread that they do not – alone or in conjunction – constitute any knowledge-first epistemology worthy of distinction.

**2.2. Reductive and non-reductive knowledge-first epistemologies.** A substantive characterization of knowledge-first epistemology may begin with Williamson’s idea that the program “*reverses* the direction of explanation predominant in the history of epistemology” (Williamson 2000: v. My italics). I italicize ‘reverses’ because it indicates a commitment to the idea that knowledge can be taken as basic and used to analyze other epistemic phenomena.

We may distinguish between reductive and non-reductive knowledge-first epistemologies. The former is the view that knowledge can be used in *reductive* analyses or explanations of other epistemological phenomena.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such analyses often take, at least nominally, the form of a X = K thesis, where ‘X’ denotes an epistemic or doxastic phenomenon. But reductive knowledge-first analyses may also take the form of a biconditional. Such versions only purport to establish co-extensionality albeit sometimes a necessary co-extensionality. In either case, reductive accounts are the clearest examples of a distinctive knowledge-first epistemology. In contrast, it is not easy to characterize a non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology.

It is not altogether clear whether Williamson is best characterized as a reductive knowledge-first theorist. At times, he appears to have reductive ambitions – for example, he defends the E = K thesis in terms of necessary co-extensionality of knowledge and evidence (Williamson 2000: 186). But often he is quite cautious.[[3]](#footnote-3) For example, he suggests an analysis of belief in terms of knowledge but makes the following qualification: “Although a full-blown conceptual analysis of *believes* in terms of *knows* is too much to expect, we can still postulate a looser connection along those lines.” (Williamson 2000: 47. Original italics which Williamson uses to mention the concepts. See also Williamson 2011: 211).

Such explicit cautionings in Williamson’s inauguration of knowledge-first epistemology have sometimes gone amiss in subsequent knowledge-first epistemologizing. For example, in a later introduction Williamson sketches an account of belief in terms of knowledge without any non-reductionist qualification or cautioning (Williamson 2013a: 4). Part of the elusiveness derives from the fact that Williamson is not always explicit about whether his aim is to give *working explanations* or *theorizing explanations* (Williamson 2009a in response to Cassam 2009).

However, other knowledge-first theorists clearly have reductionist ambitions. Sutton explicitly pursues a reductionist knowledge-first epistemology sloganized as “knowledge first and last” and Williamson has expressed sympathy for it (Sutton 2007).[[4]](#footnote-4) Despite Williamson’s role as originating knowledge-first epistemology, my aims are systematical rather than exegetical. My main point here is that arguing against reductionist knowledge-first epistemology is not to argue against a straw man.

One notorious knowledge-first view that I will set aside is the thesis that justification or justified belief is knowledge (J = K) or, alternatively, that it requires knowledge. Each of these views entails that justification (warrant in my terminology) is factive (Sutton 2007, Littlejohn 2012). Williamson also entertains the idea that “… a belief is fully justified if and only if it constitutes knowledge.” (Williamson 2013a: 5. See also 2011: 214). Though my aim is to defuse some ambitious versions of knowledge-first epistemology, I will not address views according to which justification (warrant) is factive. One reason for this is that such a view introduces special dialectical problems. A standard argumentative strategy is to argue that the target view leads to problematic consequences. But I have a hard time identifying epistemological consequences of the view that justification (warrant) is factive that I find more problematic than the view itself. Indeed, I am inclined to regard an argument that knowledge-first epistemology entails factivity of justification (warrant) as close to a *reductio*. But such an argument against knowledge-first epistemology is unlikely to be dialectically effective. Consequently, I will set aside the view that full justification (warrant) is knowledge in order to focus on aspects of knowledge-first epistemology where I hope that my engagement may be more productive.

As mentioned, it is more difficult to characterize a non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology than a reductive program. However, one interesting approach consists in articulating substantive or even constitutive epistemic *norms* in terms of knowledge, without purporting to provide a reductive analysis. To claim that knowledge is a constitutive necessary or epistemically sufficient condition on, for example, assertion is not to provide a reductive analysis of assertion in terms of knowledge. Rather, it is to claim that the postulated connection to knowledge *partly* characterizes assertion and helps distinguish it from other speech acts (Williamson 2000, Turri 2010, 2011). The claim that knowledge is the constitutive epistemic norm of assertion marks an interesting and distinctive non-reductive knowledge-first thesis (McGlynn 2014). Moreover, this approach seems to align with at least one of Williamson’s ways to promote the knowledge-first program: “I have shown elsewhere how a knowledge-first methodology casts light on such matters as the nature of indiscrimination and the norm of assertion.”(Williamson 2013a: 6-7. Here ‘elsewhere’ refers to Williamson 1990, 2000, 2007). As it will transpire, I think that it is an overstatement that knowledge-first epistemology has *been shown* to provide such insights. Yet it is important to acknowledge the methodological point that a broad knowledge-first program may *pursue* such insights without commitment to a reductionist methodology.

**2.3. Characterizations of knowledge-first epistemology in conclusion.** The preceding discussion suggests that it is not trivial to characterize a knowledge-first program in epistemology. Among the characterizations that succeed in delineating a distinctive program in epistemology, we may distinguish between reductionist and non-reductionist versions. This calls for a piecemeal approach. Consequently, I will criticize reductionist and non-reductionist versions of knowledge-first epistemology in turn.

**3. Critique of reductive knowledge-first epistemology.** As mentioned, knowledge-first epistemologists are fond of setting forth X = K thesis where ‘K’ denotes knowledge and ‘X’ denotes some other epistemic or doxastic phenomenon. Notable examples involve E = K for evidence (Williamson 2000) and J = K for justification (Sutton 2007. See also Williamson 2013a). Sometimes, the equations are shorthand for biconditionals. For example, Sliwa argued for the thesis that “An agent understands that *p* if and only if she knows that *p*” (Sliwa 2015: 58. See also Kelp 2014, Khalifa 2011, 2013). Sometimes an X= K thesis may simply label or sloganize for more modest analyses.[[5]](#footnote-5) To get clearer on this issue, let us have a closer look at the E = K thesis.

In the case of E = K, Williamson is clear that the equation is at the level of the extension and that this does not entail any equation at the level of the concepts: “E = K equates the extensions of the concepts *knowledge* and *evidence* in any possible situation… By itself, E = K does not equate the concepts themselves; nor is it to be read as an analysis of either the concept *evidence* or the concept *knowledge*… (Williamson 2000: 186). Since the claim is not one of conceptual identity, there is no simple argument, by transitivity of identity, to a commitment to the view that the concepts are identical. But if several further X = K theses are introduced, the result would be a long equation at the level of extensions – e.g., K = E = J = U … = X. Such a long equation would be at risk of reducing too many too distinct phenomena to knowledge. This should give rise to caution about adding yet a X = K (or X iff K) thesis to the existing equations (or biconditionals).

It should be noted, however, that the X = K theses may or may not be intended as identity statements. Moreover, knowledge does not always stand *alone* on the right hand side of the respective X = K equations. But sometimes the definiens consists in little but knowledge. For example, Sutton articulates the J = K thesis as follows: “a subject’s belief that *p* is justified if and only if he knows that *p*” (Sutton 2007: 8. See above for Sliwa’s 2015 articulation of a knowledge-understanding biconditional). However, knowledge may also be the *central* aspect of the definiens of the various definienda. If so, various X = K statements may be best understood as shorthand slogans for more elaborate analyses at the level of the extension.

Despite these qualifications, reductively analyzing doxastic or epistemic phenomena in terms of knowledge runs the risk of glossing over epistemologically important categories.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although all the phenomena in question may well be constitutively related to knowledge, the relationship is not plausibly that of identity. Of course, this worry is best substantiated by detailed piecemeal criticism of specific reductionist knowledge-first analyses.[[7]](#footnote-7) But since I will direct my more specific critiques at non-reductionist knowledge-first claims, I will restrict myself to the point above and some broad methodological criticisms of the reductionist knowledge-first program.

An overarching methodological worry with reductionist knowledge-first epistemology is that it is little but a traditional reductionist theory of knowledge in reverse. But a key problem with traditional reductionist theory of knowledge is its *reductionism*. As Williamson and others point out, the fact that a non-circular reductionist theory of knowledge has not been found may owe to the fact that there is no such analysis to be found: “The increasingly gerrymandered definitions were obvious signs of a degenerating research program. Most of them, if correct, seemed to make knowledge too grue-like to be worth analyzing. But in any case they succumbed one after another to counterexamples.” (Williamson 2013a: 2).

Although I have my doubts, I will here not address the historical question as to whether this is an entirely accurate characterization of post-Gettier theory of knowledge. My point here is that critics of knowledge-first epistemology may agree with such a “negative abduction.” But they may do so on the grounds that there are few, if any, non-circular reductive analyses to be found *in general*. So, such “negative abduction” arguments do not compromise non-reductive non-knowledge-first epistemologies. Furthermore, if what drives the negative case for knowledge-first epistemology is the fact there are few, if any, non-circular reductive analyses to be found *in general*, it is rather dubious to replace traditional reductionism with knowledge-first reductionism.

It is one thing to cast traditional epistemology as a degenerating research program that consists of reductive analyses in which knowledge is the analysandum. It is another to do so and simultaneously pursue similar reductive analyses of other epistemic phenomena in which knowledge is the analysans. Even if knowledge is in *some sense* more fundamental than other epistemic and doxastic phenomena, why think that it may serve as analysans in a reductive analysis of them? For example, it is often argued that the concept knowledge is ontogenetically prior to the concept belief (Nagel 2013 gives an empirical case for this assumption and McGlynn *this volume* criticize it). But even if knowledge is ontogenetically prior, there is a considerable step from there to the assumption that it is “first” in an epistemological theorizing. Indeed, this is a giant step for those among us who reject that epistemology is primarily about conceptual analysis (Williamson 2007). I return to this point in Sect. 5.

In a nutshell: Why isn’t reductionist knowledge-first epistemology prone to the very same sort of methodological problems that knowledge-first advocates claim beset prior reductionist epistemology? As far as I am aware, knowledge-first epistemologists have done little to answer to this question. This may simply indicate that there are few, if any, reductive knowledge-first epistemologists – I am genuinely unsure about this. But, as noted, if knowledge-first epistemology is not reductionist, it is not clear whether there is a distinctive knowledge-first *program*. Moreover, a good range of ongoing knowledge-first epistemology *appears* to be a reductionist epistemology in which knowledge plays the role of analysans rather than that of analysandum. Unfortunately, knowledge-first proponents are not always as clear about this as they could be about this. It would be helpful if knowledge-first proponents would be more explicit as to whether various X = K theses are set forth as reductive analysis, as a mere slogan or as something in between. In the cases in which a X = K thesis is set forth as a reductive analysis, the methodological queries above should be addressed head on. If not, the nature of the analysis or account that the X = K thesis sloganizes should be specified.

The present broad methodological criticism are not meant to be the final word on reductionist knowledge-first epistemology. But perhaps it will encourage some reflection. More constructively, it motivates a non-reductionist alternative – equilibristic epistemology – that I set forth in Section 5. Meanwhile, I will turn to non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology.

**Sect. 4. Non-reductive knowledge norms of assertion and action.** Is there a distinctive knowledge-first epistemology that avoids the problems of reductionism? As mentioned, candidates for such a program may be those that involve constitutive knowledge *norms*. The view that knowledge is the constitutive epistemic norm of assertion in combination with the idea that knowledge is unanalyzable, distinguishes a brand of knowledge-first epistemology. Thus, the knowledge account of epistemic norms marks one principled way of carrying out a non-reductive, but nevertheless distinctive, knowledge-first agenda (cf. McGlynn 2014: 17-18).

Furthermore, the debates over epistemic norms have ramifications for other areas of epistemology. For example, knowledge norms have been invoked in arguments for pragmatic encroachment theories of knowledge.[[8]](#footnote-8) Likewise, DeRose argues that “The knowledge account of assertion demands a contextualist account of knowledge and is simply incredible without it.” (DeRose 2002: 182). However, Williamson and Turri uphold knowledge norms but reject pragmatic encroachment and contextualism (Williamson 2005, Turri 2010).

Given their significance, the epistemic norms of assertion and action are good candidates for an assessment of an important strand of non-reductive but distinctive knowledge-first epistemology. Such an assessment is a comparative exercise (Williamson 2013a; Benton 2014). Here I will focus on the epistemic norms of *assertion*. I have argued against knowledge norms of elsewhere (Gerken 2011, 2015a). So, here I will extend some of these arguments to bear on the knowledge norm of assertion. On this basis, I will argue that these problems indicate more general challenges for this brand of non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology.

**4.1. Knowledge norms of assertion and their competitors.** Williamson articulates his knowledge norm as a necessary condition: One must: assert p only if one knows that p (Williamson 2000: 241). However, DeRose accepts a biconditional version and Hawthorne expresses sympathy for it (DeRose 2002: 217 and Hawthorne 2004: 23 fn. 58). Moreover, knowledge-first epistemologists tend to accept a biconditional knowledge norm of action (see Hawthorne and Stanley’s 2008 Reason-Knowledge principle. See also Fantl and McGrath 2009, 2012). Of course, proponents of a biconditional knowledge norm only uphold the *epistemic* sufficiency of knowledge for assertion. Every proponent of a knowledge norm of assertion, accepts that assertion is subject to other extra-epistemic norms such as norms of relevance (Grice 1989). Hence, there is no reduction of assertion to knowledge. Rather, knowledge is argued to be the single constitutive *epistemic* norm of assertion that distinguishes it from other speech acts (Williamson 2000, Ch. 11).

Given the constitutivity claim, it is natural – although not mandatory – to accept the *epistemic* sufficiency of knowledge for assertion. Moreover, a biconditional knowledge norm is more apt to serve as cornerstone of a knowledge-first program than only a necessary condition. In any case, it will be worth considering a more ambitious biconditional knowledge norm of assertion which I label ‘KNAS’ for short (from Brown 2010 with minor reformulations):

**KNAS**

S is in a good enough epistemic position to assert that *p* iff S knows that *p*.

Linguistic data cited in favor of KNAS includes patters of reasonable complaints about assertions without knowledge, Moore paradoxes, lottery paradoxes and more (Benton 2014). Thus, the main dynamic of the contemporary debate has consisted in opponents of knowledge norms respond to such phenomena (see McGlynn 2014 and McKinnon 2015 for surveys concluding that knowledge norms are not well supported).

Here I seek to change this dynamic a bit by focusing on challenges to KNAS. Elsewhere, I have been in the defensive mode (Gerken 2015a). But, as Williamson rightly emphasizes, the knowledge norm of assertion must be evaluated in comparison with its alternatives: “In the long run, knowledge-first epistemology too should be judged by its fruitfulness as a research program, compared to its competitors.”(Williamson 2013a: 6-7). A fruitful comparison requires critical discussion of both phenomena that supports and compromises knowledge norm. Here I focus on the latter.

Moreover, it will be important to present not only methodological but also substantive alternatives to knowledge-first epistemology. So, I will briefly present my favored ‘Warrant-Assertive Speech Act’ norm of assertion and note some of my reasons for preferring it to the knowledge norm.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**WASA**

In a conversational context, CC, in which S’s assertion that *p* conveys that *p*, S meets the epistemic conditions on appropriate assertion that p **(if and) only if** S’s assertion is appropriately based on a degree of warrant for believing that *p* that is adequate relative to CC.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Although WASA is more complicated that KNAS, the idea is simple enough. The conversational context that S is in determines the threshold of warrant that S needs for asserting that *p*. The conversational context is constituted by a wide range of factors which include but are not restricted to S’s rational beliefs or presuppositions about:

(i) alternative assertions (including qualified assertions).

(ii) the availability of evidence for the asserted content (or what is conveyed by it).

(iii) the urgency of conveying the asserted content (or what is conveyed by it).

(iv) the relevant stakes.

(v) social roles and conventions.[[11]](#footnote-11)

For example, if S rationally believes the stakes are high, further evidence is easily available and it is non-urgent to assert right away, then the degree of warrant required for assertion can exceed the degree of warrant that is required for knowledge (Brown 2008, Gerken 2012, 2015c). But in a conversational context in which the stakes are so low that it would be more costly to gather further evidence than to assert something false, the degree of warrant required for assertion may fall below the degree of warrant that is required for knowledge.[[12]](#footnote-12)

WASA involves contextual variation in the *degree* of warrant that is required for assertion. In this regard it differs from binary non-factive epistemic norms (Douven 2006, Lackey 2007, Kvanvig 2009, Madison 2010). But WASA moreover permits for a variation in the required *kind* of warrant (Gerken 2012a, 2015c). In some contexts, an externalist kind of warrant – entitlement – will do. Assume, for example, that Sally comes to believe that Jane is at the conference on the basis of catching a glimpse of her crossing the lobby in the distance. Even if Sally forgets the source of her belief, we may assume that it is entitled (Burge 1996: 38). Many externalists – myself included – may even regard Sally as knowing that Jane is at the conference. If someone casually asks Sally whether Jane has arrived, and the interaction must be brief, she may meet the epistemic conditions on asserting that Jane is at the conference in virtue of being entitled. Of course, in *many* contexts, Sally should qualify this assertion or weaken its content unless she improves her epistemic position. All I claim is that *some* contexts an adequate degree of entitlement may meet the warrant-demand.

However, in many, perhaps most, conversational contexts the asserter is reasonably expected to be able to articulate some reasons in favor of the content of her assertion.[[13]](#footnote-13) I call such conversational contexts ‘discursive contexts.’ In discursive contexts, the speaker must possess an internalist kind of warrant, ‘discursive justification’ that requires that the agent can articulate her epistemic grounds as reasons (Gerken 2012a, 2015c; See also Leite 2005). Thus, I articulate a *species* of WASA, the Discursive Justification-Assertion account, DJA, as follows:

**DJA** In the discursive conversational context, DCC, in which S’s assertion that *p* conveys that *p*, S meets the epistemic conditions on appropriate assertion that p **(if and) only if** S’s assertion is appropriately based on a degree of discursive justification for believing that p that is adequate relative to DCC.

I find that the epistemic norm WASA and its internalist species DJA provide a richer account of a wide range of linguistic phenomena than norms that appeal to knowledge and nothing else. This is, in part, because of the pluralism about warrant. On this note, let me move from presentation to argumentation.

**4.2. Challenges to the knowledge norm.** The knowledge norm is in dispute in part because there are *prima facie* counterexamples to both directions of the biconditional, KNAS. I will discuss some of such candidate counterexamples (some new, some old). This is not the place to defend any one of them in detail. But hope to say enough to consider their methodological ramifications for a non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology. Specifically, I will argue that the apparent simplicity of the knowledge-first approach to epistemic norms is deceptive. The knowledge-first approach requires an increasingly complex apparatus of auxiliary assumptions and maneuvers that render it no more tidy than the tradition it seeks to replace.

The case above in which Sally forms the belief that Jane is at the conference but forget its source (a glimpse) provides a methodologically interesting example. A core assumption in externalist epistemology is that Sally may know that Jane is at the conference although she has no access to and, hence, cannot articulate any reasons for asserting so. Of course, this assumption is compatible with the idea that knowledge that *p* is a necessary condition on epistemically appropriate assertion that *p*. But, in certain *discursive* conversational contexts, Sally may not be in an epistemic position to assert that Jane is at the conference. Insofar as Sally’s lack of access to reasons is an epistemic deficit, the case may form a novel type of counterexample to the sufficiency claim of KNAS (see Gerken 2012a, 2013b for an argument the ability to access and articulate reasons is epistemically significant).

I will address the prospects for knowledge-first responses to the challenge from discursive conversational contexts below. But for the sake of comparison, note that this issue is straightforwardly addressed by the distinction between warrant generally (including entitlement) and discursive justification and the corresponding distinction between WASA and DJA. Furthermore, different species of knowledge may be characterized by reference to the entitlement-justification distinction and I think that they should be.[[14]](#footnote-14) In contrast, someone who thinks that knowledge must be explanatorily first will have a hard time distinguishing between species of knowledge by reference to difference in kinds of warrant. So, a knowledge-first proponent must either reject that there are different species of knowledge or find another way of individuating between them.[[15]](#footnote-15) Likewise, account of the case at hand will be not be straightforward if all that we can appeal to in assessing assertion epistemically is knowledge *simpliciter*.

The present approach may also account for much of the linguistic data that knowledge-first proponents have themselves appealed to. There is an important methodological point to be drawn from this. The knowledge norm is often motivated by the fact that it can account for the prominence of ‘knowledge’ in everyday epistemic assessment of assertion (Williamson 2000, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). It is natural to say ‘you shouldn’t have asserted that *p* since you didn’t know that *p*.’Elsewhere, I have addressed such linguistic data in the context of the epistemic norms of action (Gerken 2011, 2015a). Transposed to the case of assertion, I’ve argued for the following idea:

**(Normal Coincidence)\***

In normal cases of epistemic assessment, the degree of warrant necessary for S’s knowing that p is frequently necessary and very frequently sufficient for the epistemic permissibility of S’s asserting that p.

Given this principle, it is reasonable to suppose that ‘knows’ serves us well as “communicative heuristic” to covey complex epistemic information in a simple and reasonably accurate manner. In consequence, KNAS may be seen as a crude but useful *folk* epistemological principle. It tends to be reasonably accurate in normal cases of epistemic assessment. But sometimes it is inaccurate and this is what the counterexamples to it indicate (Gerken 2015a*,* Sect. 5C. I elaborate in Gerken *MS*). The methodologically important point is that both directions of KNAS may well be overgeneralizations from paradigm cases. In many such cases, someone who knows that *p* also meets the epistemic conditions on assertion that *p*. In many other cases, someone who does not know that *p* does not meet the epistemic conditions on assertion that *p*. Despite the importance of paradigm cases, the fact that there are more complex cases in which knowledge and the epistemic conditions come apart, puts pressure on knowledge-first methodology. Specifically, the notion we should start and *end* with paradigm cases because we have a better grasp of them seems problematic if there are significant exceptions from such cases. And, as opponents of knowledge norms have pointed out, there is no shortage of exceptions.

For instance, I may not be in a position to assert that Ortcutt is a spy even though I know that this is the case if my evidence is not strong enough to bring Ortcutt to court and asserting so will give Ortcutt a chance to escape (for elaboration, see the case *SPY* in Gerken 2014: 732-3). Such exceptions to the sufficiency direction of KNAS may be most forceful in first-person past tense knowledge ascriptions. Consider, for example, Brown’s case, *AFFAIR*,in which S knows that S\*’s wife is cheating but withholds asserting so until he has more conclusive evidence (for elaboration, see Brown 2008). Here saying ‘I knew but I was not in a position to assert so until I had stronger evidence’ is both natural and appropriate. As mentioned, the case of externalist (entitlement-based) knowledge in discursive contexts may be another problematic case. It may be a case in which Sally knows that *p* although she is not in an epistemic position to assert that *p* outright due to her lack of reasons to back up her assertion.

It is important to acknowledge that there is an assortment of moves available to knowledge-first theorists. It may be argued on internalist grounds that the speaker does not know. Another popular response is to embrace pragmatic encroachment and argue that the speaker no longer knows given that the stakes have risen. It may also be argued that the speaker in fact meets the epistemic norm although she violates some other non-epistemic norm. Furthermore, it can be argued that the speaker only knows that it is highly probable that, for example, the wife is cheating. Likewise, it may be argued that the cases rest on confusing having a reason with having a sufficient reason. Moreover, it may be argued that the relevant speech act is not an assertion and, therefore, not subject to the knowledge norm but to another more demanding epistemic norm.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The space for such maneuvering is very wide in philosophy. Indeed, this is one reason why principles that are central to a philosophical program are rarely refuted by way of counterexample alone. However, each of these responses is associated with considerable costs. Consider, the claim that the additional requirements on assertion have nothing to do with its *epistemic* norm but with an extra-epistemic norm. This response leaves a good deal to explain. Why the subject can meet those additional requirements by improving her *epistemic* position? Why is it apt to criticize someone who asserts on the basis of knowledge in *epistemic* terms? In the relevant cases, it can be reasonable to complain: “you shouldn’t have asserted that since you didn’t have any reasons/strong enough evidence for believing it.” It seems *ad hoc* to regard reasonable complaints in terms of knowledge as strong evidence for KNAS and then dismiss similar complaints that seem to compromise it.

Of course, I do not want to simply dismiss any possible responses – or some combination thereof – prior to a proper development of them. However, the onus is on knowledge-first theorists to develop these responses at a level of detail that admits of criticism.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is unsatisfactory to just point to a response strategy and assume that it can handle all troublesome cases. Moreover, a combination of responses may well be required to address the *variety* counterexamples indicated above. If so, the sufficiency of knowledge for assertion requires a complex of interacting auxiliary assumptions.

We find a similar dynamic in the candidate counterexamples to the necessity of knowledge for assertion. Such cases include cases of extremely well-warranted belief (perhaps accompanied by low stakes, lack of further available evidence, and no opportunity for alternative assertions) and Gettier-style cases (Gettier 1963; Gerken 2011a). Again, there is a wide range of moves available to the knowledge-first epistemologists. For example, they may invoke an excuse maneuver according to which the asserter is not meeting the epistemic norm of assertion but rather excused from violating it (Williamson 2000, *forthcoming*; DeRose 2002; Littlejohn 2012). Or they may argue that the speaker does have knowledge but only of the proposition that the content of the assertion is probable (Stanley and Hawthorne 2008). Or they may reject that the speech acts in question are assertions (Turri 2010, 2011). Again, the range of such maneuvers is very wide. I have argued against some of these moves (Gerken 2011a, 2012, 2014, 2015a). Since space does not permit for detailed argumentation here, I will make a couple of general methodological points.

The first point is that the responses to the cases of candidate counterexamples to the knowledge norm of assertion are controversial and may seem *ad hoc*. Consequently, the dynamic begins to look somewhat familiar in some respects. The knowledge norms may be defended against counterexamples by revising assumptions about knowledge (or ‘knowledge’) or by invoking auxiliary assumptions. The latter may concern excuses, knowledge of probability, the speech act of assertion and so forth. However, the auxiliary assumptions that knowledge-first epistemologists have set forth have been argued to be problematic (McGlynn 2014). For example, I have argued that the appeal to excuses is either a *deus ex machina* or subject to substantive problems or collapsing into a warrant account (Gerken 2011). Of course, knowledge-first proponents may respond by specifying the operative notion of an excuse accordingly.

To briefly consider a more specific instance of this dynamic, consider my objection that the excuse maneuver is at the risk of “collapsing” into a warrant account. If one is excused from asserting that *p* without knowing that *p* in virtue of being very well warranted in believing that *p*, then the speaker’s degree of warrant and the fact that the belief is false appears to do the explanatory job (Gerken 2011). One response might consist in qualifying the account of excuses such that one cannot be excused from asserting falsely in virtue of being very well warranted. I regard this further qualification as implausible and in need of independent motivation. Indeed, it strikes me as coming fairly close to gerrymandering the notion of excuse to salvage the knowledge norm. Of course, knowledge-first proponents see things otherwise. But the methodological point is that the alleged advantage of knowledge-first epistemology – namely, that it is simpler than the alternative – appears to have all but evaporated. The initially straightforward knowledge norms that accounted well or paradigm cases appear to require an increasingly complex apparatus of, for example, excuses. So, although the knowledge norms themselves may be preserved in their original form, a comprehensive account of all the cases requires very considerable auxiliary assumptions.

The dialectic is subtle because the responses rarely consists in fiddling with the knowledge norm itself. So, the contrast is that between a simple knowledge norm which can be preserved by adopting a complex of auxiliary assumptions and a more complex epistemic norm, such as WASA, that can deal with a wider set of cases – including the counterexamples to KNAS – without auxiliaries.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Something similar may be said of the responses that consist in revising basic assumptions about knowledge itself. For example, some (but not all)[[19]](#footnote-19) pragmatic encroachers will respond to Brown’s *AFFAIR* case by claiming that since the stakes are high, the speaker no longer knows. Similarly, some (but not all) contextualists will claim that the utterance of ‘S knows that *p*’ is no longer true. Of course, there is great debate about whether this response marks a refreshing insight or severe problem. I take it to be a problem (Gerken 2015b, Anderson 2015). So, does Williamson who develops a response according to which higher-order knowledge is required as the stakes go up (Williamson 2005).

But here I will make a different point. As I have indicated, the myopic focus on *stakes* as determining the epistemic position one must be in for one to be in a position to assert that *p* or act on (the belief that) *p* is unfortunate. A wide range of factors are determinants of the relevant epistemic position. This is important in its own right. (For one thing, it speaks against the idea that raising stakes *invariably* raise the epistemic requirements on action or assertion – see Gerken *MS*). But it yields a particular challenge to proponents of knowledge norms. Assume, for the sake of argument, that the epistemic position required for assertion/action may be altered by variation in things such as availability of evidence, urgency, social roles, alternative assertions/courses of action etc. If the assumption that urgency, for example, may determine whether someone knows is too much of a bullet to bite even for pragmatic encroachers, then a different response is required to cases that are driven by variations in urgency rather than in stakes. While I have not encountered a response to this objection (first noted in Gerken 2011, Sect. 6 and 7), a response may, of course, be developed. However, the risk of gerrymandering in the face of this objection should be obvious.

A word of qualification: I do not mean to deny that progress may come from developing responses to objections to knowledge norms.[[20]](#footnote-20) My main point is that the responses that knowledge-first proponents invoke to address troublesome cases are by no means free of the risk of gerrymandering and *ad hoc*’ness (see also McGlynn 2014, Ch. 8). At present, the debates over the objections and responses to knowledge norm bear resemblance to clashes of paradigms in sciences. Whereas knowledge-first epistemologists regard the auxiliary assumptions as natural aspects of their account, opponents regard them as forlorn attempts to salvage the knowledge norms from obvious counterexamples. However, many of the challenges to the knowledge norms are so novel that responses to the challenges are still under development. Indeed, some challenges remain unaddressed. So, we do not yet have a history of increasingly complex auxiliary assumptions. Perhaps we will have to witness fifty years of fiddling with, for example, the excuse maneuver before the picture is clear enough for an assessment.

**4.3. Non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology in conclusion.** The preceding reflections suggest a more prescriptive methodological point: We should not only work with schematic knowledge ascriptions in the abstract or with paradigm cases of knowledge and assertion. Rather, we should consider a wide variety of cases that exemplify various configurations of parameters of the conversational context. Doing so may reveal that some motivations of knowledge norms are overly programmatic overgeneralizations. For example, considering a wider set of cases reveals some of the problems with the step from the reasonable assumption that ‘knows’ is prominent in assessment of assertion to the conclusion that knowledge is the norm of assertion (Gerken 2015a, MS).

I favor WASA and its species, DJA, to knowledge norms in part because I take them to provide more accurate explanatory accounts of the sort of phenomena that knowledge-first epistemologists have invoked. Reflection on the counterexamples suggest that our use of ‘knows’ in criticizing assertion works a *communicative heuristic* – i.e., as cognitively cheap shorthand uses that work well for us because they *normally* align with the contextually variable warrant-demand on assertion.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, the prominent roles of ‘knowledge’ in our folk epistemological talk and thought are perfectly compatible with alternatives to knowledge norms. (Or so I have argued in the case of action, cf. Gerken 2011, 2015a). As suggested above, these arguments transpose *mutatis mutandis* to the case of assertion.

Let me conclude with a basic but important point. Opposition to the knowledge-first agenda or specific alternative principles, such as WASA, does *not* yield any commitment to any “experience-first” epistemology (Dougherty and Rysiew 2013a, b). Such an epistemology is, as Williamson argues, hard to distinguish from a traditional “appearance-first” epistemology which he rightly criticizes (Williamson 2013b). However, the staging of this debate is unfortunate. Williamson comes close to suggesting that knowledge-first epistemology aligns with externalist epistemology *in general*. Dougherty and Rysiew respond by adopting a radically internalist “experience-first” alternative. What I find unfortunate is that this juxtaposition suggests (although it does not entail) a *false dilemma* between two extremes: Knowledge-first and experience-first. This alleged choice is a dilemma because both options are unattractive. It is a false dilemma because there are viable alternatives. One such alternative is a pluralistic view that includes both epistemic externalist and epistemically internalist species of warrant (Gerken 2013b, *forthcoming*). Likewise, a broader methodological alternative is to abandon the idea that any single epistemic phenomenon is “first.”

I will not address the internalism/externalism dispute here (but see Gerken 2013b, *forthcoming*). But it is worth reemphasizing that WASA allows that one meets the epistemic requirements on assertion by externalist warrant (entitlement) alone. Such warrant need not be based on appearances, experiences, reasons or any such. So, one may reject knowledge-first epistemology and accept the most prominent brands of externalism (see, e.g., Goldman 1979, Burge 2003, Sosa 2007, Graham 2012). Although this is a basic point, it is apt to illustrate why the above-mentioned dilemma is a false dilemma.

My broader aim has been to question whether specific non-reductive knowledge-first epistemological *theses* are plausible and robust enough to constitute a knowledge-first *program*. But neither specific theses nor an knowledge-first agenda may be refuted by way of counterexamples. However, I have argued that such counterexamples generate an objection-response dynamic that involves an increasing apparatus of auxiliary assumptions that may become increasingly *ad hoc* or gerrymandered. So, although the challenges to non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology in the guise of knowledge norms of assertion and action are non-conclusive, I hope that they will encourage some reflection among knowledge-first epistemologists.

Along the way, I have indicated serious competitors to the substantive non-reductive knowledge-first theses. In the next section, I will extend this point to the methodological level and argue that there is a less radical alternative to knowledge-first epistemology.

**5. Towards a “nothing’s first” alternative: Equilibristic epistemology.** Let me briskly sketch what strikes me as a more promising methodological way forward. I will not be able to develop this methodological alternative in satisfying detail (although I say more in Gerken MS *Ch. 3*). But perhaps I can convey two broad points.

First, I hope that the sketch will speak to various suggestions that an alternative to a knowledge-first epistemology involves a return to a “degenerating research program” of providing “sterile and inward-looking” reductive analyses of knowledge that are “small-minded and old-fashioned.” (Williamson 2013: 2).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Second, by sketching a methodological alternative, I can indicate what I take to be a grain of truth in non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology. For the alternative is compatible with the assumption that reflective judgments about knowledge may help us understand other epistemic phenomena and, crucially, *vice versa*. Indeed, my positive message is that a good deal can be learned by isolating grains of truth to be found in non-reductive knowledge-first epistemology.

**5.1. Equilibristic epistemology.** I label my alternative methodology ‘equilibristic epistemology’ because it pursues a “wide reflective equilibrium” between folk epistemological judgments, epistemological principles as well as interrelations between different epistemic phenomena.[[23]](#footnote-23) One of its central claims is that among the most basic epistemic and doxastic phenomena, no one phenomenon is sufficiently explanatorily primary to serve as a primary explainer of the others. Thus, I do not advocate a warrant-first, rationality-first or belief-first epistemology. Nothing is first.

Another aspect of equilibristic epistemology is that the tacit principles of our folk epistemology may diverge from the most plausible epistemological principles. Thus, critical reflection on intuitive judgments about cases may inform epistemological theorizing and *vice versa*. Elsewhere, I outline principles of this latter aspect of the equilibristic epistemology (Gerken *MS*, Chapter 3). Here I focus on its former aspect – the one that pertains to explanatory primacy and lack thereof. It can be articulated in the form of a broad principle:

**Principle of Non-Primacy:**

*The most fundamental epistemic and doxastic phenomena, concepts and words are non-reducible and no one of these phenomena, concepts or words can serve as the primary explainer of the others.*

The Principle of Non-Primacy is a negative one. But a more positive corollary of it is that fundamental phenomena (concepts, words) must be co-investigated. By considering fundamental epistemic and doxastic phenomena relation to each other, important constitutive connections may be discovered. Some aspects of this viewpoint are inspired by Strawson’s non-reductive methodology (Strawson 1992). However, I part ways with Strawson at important crossroads.[[24]](#footnote-24) The broad idea that is congenial to Strawson is, roughly put, that we should abandon reductive analysis in favor of *non-reductive elucidation* which may be circular (Strawson 1992, Ch. 2).

In epistemology, this means that we should abandon attempts to reductively analyze knowledge in terms of belief, rationality and so forth. But it also means that we should not simply *reverse* this strategy and seek to reductively analyze epistemic rationality, evidence or belief in terms of knowledge. Rather, we should consider epistemic and doxastic phenomena such as knowledge, belief, normal circumstances, warrant, epistemic luck, evidence and so forth in relation to each other. Identifying constitutive relations between such phenomena does not require that any these phenomena may be non-circularly reduced to other allegedly primary phenomena. Thus counterproductive constraints of reductionist epistemology may be shed.

The equilibristic methodology departs radically from Strawson’s insofar as it is not focused on *conceptual* analysis or on *linguistic* analysis of our ordinary epistemic vocabulary. Strawson’s approach inherits elements of the “linguistic turn” that I want to distance myself from. The primary objects of study are not primarily linguistic or conceptual but the epistemic subject matter. So, with regard to the *explanandum*, the equilibristic epistemology aligns with Williamson’s methodology rather than with Strawson’s (Williamson 2007). Epistemological questions should often be taken at face value. The primary object of study for the theory of knowledge is knowledge. It is not the word ‘knowledge’ or the concept knowledge.

Oddly enough, however, proponents of knowledge norms of action and assertion sometimes rely heavily on ordinary language phenomena such as the claim that it is natural to use ‘knows’ in epistemic assessment (Williamson 2000, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008. Gerken 2015a, *MS* for criticism). Likewise, the step from the purported ontogenetic primacy of the concept knowledge to the idea that knowledge is first in epistemology would be less implausible if epistemology was primarily concerned with conceptual analysis.[[25]](#footnote-25)

My approach differs from the Strawsonian methodology by upholding a firmer distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification in epistemological theorizing.[[26]](#footnote-26) Due to Strawson’s focus on conceptual analysis he emphasizes that “…the acquisition of the theoretical concepts of the special disciplines presupposes and rests upon the possession of the pre-theoretical concepts of ordinary life” (Strawson 1992: 21).

Strawson’s claim is a claim about the genesis of theoretical *concepts*. As such it has some plausibility.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, once we shift the focus from concepts to their referents, it ceases to be plausible that the ontogenetic earliness of concepts corresponds to the explanatory primacy at the level of extension. Thus, I am skeptical about idea that the development of our concepts must correspond to a hierarchy of ontological or explanatory basicness at the level of the extension. We acquire the concept water before we acquire the concepts hydrogen and oxygen. But at the level of the extension, water is not more basic than hydrogen and oxygen. On the contrary, if there is an asymmetric basicness relation, it is the opposite of the order of conceptual acquisition. This is so even if we could not, as a practical matter, come to acquire the concepts hydrogen and oxygen without first possessing the concept water. Similarly, even if we must acquire the concept knowledge before, for example, the concept belief, this would not provide evidence that knowledge itself is more explanatorily basic than belief itself.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In epistemology we should also be open for the idea that some of the most explanatorily basic epistemic phenomena may only be identified at later stages of inquiry. For example, the phenomena that I denote by the label ‘normal epistemic circumstances’ may be explanatorily basic (Gerken 2013a). But in the *genesis* of explanation, it is invoked after knowledge and rationality are invoked. Perhaps it is only psychologically possible to identify it via reflection on judgments about knowledge and epistemic rationality. Likewise, we should even be open to the idea that properties which may only be recognized through overt theorizing may turn out to be explanatorily basic. The modal property of *safety* may be a candidate.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even if we could only recognize and conceptualize this modal property via judgments about knowledge, we may, once it is recognized, work with it in relation to other phenomena such as the metaphysics of modality. In the best case, we may, thereby, improve our understanding of safety. Perhaps, we may even be able to put an improved understanding of safety to use in refining our previous understanding of knowledge. Whether or not safety is a good candidate of a basic explanatory phenomenon is a disputed matter. But this dispute is hardly methodologically misguided in virtue of the fact that safety was not properly recognized until 1970 (Dretske 1970, 1971).

As mentioned, the assumption that the word ‘knowledge’ (or the concept knowledge) is ontogenetically prior to, for example, the word ‘belief’ (or the concept belief) is itself controversial (for this controversy, see Nagel 2013 vs. McGlynn *this volume*). But even if true, the assumption should not automatically be taken as a reason to reflect an explanatory primacy relation in epistemology. If knowledge is ontogenetically “first” in our conceptual development, this may be a reason to think that it is first in the context of discovery. But even if knowledge it is first in the context of discovery, this does *not* indicate that it is explanatorily first in the context of justification (pun intended).

The equilibristic epistemology does not entail or even suggest that there are no asymmetric explanatory basicness relations to be found. Cassam characterizes explanatory basicness as follows: “A concept C is more explanatorily basic than another concept D if and only if C can be explained without using D but D cannot be explained without using C” (Cassam 2009). As mentioned, the aim of equilibristic epistemology is not primarily conceptual analysis but substantive explanation. However, Cassam’s idea of explanatory basicness may be transposed from the conceptual to the substantive realm. Indeed, doing so provides some specification of a central claim of equilibristic epistemology that among the most basic epistemic and doxastic phenomena, no one is so significantly more explanatorily basic than the others that be said to be a primary explainer. This claim is compatible with Cassam’s idea that there are asymmetric explanatory relations between epistemic concepts, words and phenomena. But acknowledging this much does not entail that any one phenomenon is “first” in the sense of being significantly more explanatorily basic than other basic phenomena. This assumption also tells against a *quantitative* account of explanatory primacy based on the claim that knowledge figures prominently in the explanans of *more* epistemological explanations than any other epistemic or doxastic phenomenon.[[30]](#footnote-30) Such an approach faces multiple challenges. First and foremost, the quantitative approach would at best characterize a rather “thin” knowledge-*foremost* program rather than a principled knowledge-*first* program. This point is a variation of the initial point that to say that knowledge is ubiquitous, central and prominent in our folk epistemology does not distinguish an epistemological program. Second, it is controversial that knowledge does in fact figure prominently in the explanans in more *successful* explanations than any other notion. As I have argued in the case of epistemic norms, the knowledge-first approaches may lack in explanatory power what they have in simplicity. Finally, there appears to be areas of epistemology in which a fruitful investigation may be conducted without centrally invoking knowledge. For example, it can be both feasible and fruitful to consider varieties and properties of reliability in their own right.

Likewise, a principled argument for explanatory primacy does not follow from the fact that the knowledge-first approach has inspired fruitful work in new directions.[[31]](#footnote-31) I believe that it has. But the assumption that starting with judgments about knowledge and considering their consequences is fruitful would at best to show that this is a fruitful modus operandi for *one part* of the epistemological project. Unless it is argued that this is the most basic part, there is no sense in which knowledge is argued to be explanatorily primary. But much equally foundational work in epistemology barely mentions knowledge.[[32]](#footnote-32) Moreover, it seems to me that much of the interesting work on, for example, safety or luminosity carried out by self-declared knowledge-first theorists could, in principle, have been carried out without commitment to knowledge-first epistemology. Finally, to note that Williamson is an extraordinarily ingenious and resourceful epistemologist who benefits from starting with knowledge is not to provide a principled characterization of a knowledge-first program.[[33]](#footnote-33) In general, then, thin methodological claims to the effect that we should often begin with judgments about knowledge seem too thin to constitute a distinctive knowledge-first epistemology.

However, Williamson and the best of his followers should be credited for arguing that knowledge is as explanatorily *as basic* as any epistemological phenomenon.[[34]](#footnote-34) Given this assumption, reflection on knowledge and judgments about cases of knowledge may be used constructively in theoretical elucidations of other epistemic phenomena such as belief, epistemic luck etc. This, I believe, is a grain of truth in knowledge-first epistemology that may be well worth preserving. However, the equilibristic epistemology that I have sketched is able to preserve this grain of truth.

To sum up, the positive case for knowledge-first epistemology hinges to some extent on a misguided assumption that rough and ready ordinary language phrases that serve our everyday communication about matters epistemic may inform epistemology in a fairly straightforward manner. But while our folk epistemological practices should inform epistemology, they should not inform it in any straightforward manner. As epistemologists we should *critically* assess our folk epistemology.

The negative case for knowledge-first epistemology, in turn, has tended to target radical internalist alternatives or to presuppose that the opposition is committed to pursuing reductionist accounts of knowledge. I have tried to convey that there are better alternatives available and sketched some of them. I hope to someday say more about equilibristic methodology for philosophy more generally.[[35]](#footnote-35) But here the broad label has mainly served as a broad contrast in my assessment of the knowledge-first agenda.

**Sect. 6. Conclusion.** I have argued that both reductive and non-reductive knowledge-first approaches are problematic. However, reflection on the alternative that I – in lieu of a better label – call ‘equilibristic epistemology’ suggests that a less radical methodology is available to epistemologists.

Although my general assessment of knowledge-first epistemology is negative, it is important to acknowledge that the movement has offered an interesting “perspective shift.” Even if knowledge (or ‘knowledge’ or knowledge) is in no distinctive way “first”, such a perspective shift may provide an illuminating perspective on core epistemological phenomena.[[36]](#footnote-36) For example, knowledge norms of assertion may reflect important aspects of our *folk* epistemology. However, our folk epistemology is important to understand even though it diverges systematically from the most plausible epistemological principles.[[37]](#footnote-37) Moreover, the knowledge-first agenda has been an antidote to the at times myopic focus on providing a reductive analysis of knowledge.

However, recognizing these contributions is a far cry from providing substantive grounds for adopting a substantive knowledge-first program. The fact that other epistemic phenomena can be illuminated by reflection on knowledge is perfectly compatible with the fact that knowledge may be illuminated by reflection on other epistemic phenomena. Opposition to knowledge-first epistemology is committed to uphold this much. But it is not committed to reductive analysis of knowledge. So, if the negative motivation for knowledge-first epistemology hinges on such a charge, it is rather feeble. There are non-reductionist alternatives – including epistemically externalist ones – and the equilibristic epistemology sketched here is among them.

Nevertheless, there are important grains of truths in the contemporary knowledge-first theory. My concern is that an overly radicalized and overly programmatic knowledge-first agenda distracts from those truths. For example, it may be a grain of truth in knowledge-first epistemology that knowledge is basic and unanalyzable. The ironic mistake of the most radical strands of the knowledge-first program is that of *reversing*, rather than abandoning, the reductionist ambitions of the tradition it criticizes. This reaction strikes me as an overreaction. The alternative I have suggested consists in taking knowledge, belief, rationality, normal circumstances etc. to be explanatorily basic, non-reducible phenomena. According to an equilibristic methodology, we should explore of constitutive *relations* between these epistemic and doxastic phenomena. In this manner, knowledge may illuminate other epistemological and doxastic phenomena – *and vice versa.*[[38]](#footnote-38)

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1. The terminology derives from Burge 2003. See Graham 2012, Gerken 2013a, 2013b and *forthcoming*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maybe we need to require that knowledge can be used as the analysans in reductive analysis of a *substantive range* of epistemological or doxastic phenomena. Thanks to the editors. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note also that Williamson holds that even if the concepts evidence and knowledge “… are a priori, it does not follow that one is prior to the other” (Williamson 2000: 186). The notion of priority is not explicated but a charitable reading of this remark attributes cautiousness about reductionism to Williamson. But such explicit cautioning has at times disappeared in subsequent debates. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Indeed, Williamson scholars might take notice of Williamson’s blurb about Sutton’s book (Sutton 2007):

   “(Sutton) argues with vigor and originality for a knowledge-centered theory of justification, testimony, and inference that flies in the face of received opinion but grows ever more plausible the more one thinks about it.”

   Despite the endorsement of a reductionist knowledge-first epistemology, I am hesitant to cite such a blurb as a “smoking gun.” The discursive context differs from the scholarly contexts in which we normally articulate our commitments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., Williamson on belief (Williamson 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a reductive knowledge-first epistemologist who seeks to reduce other epistemic and doxastic *concepts* to the concept knowledge, the analog worry will be that this approach glosses over too many conceptual differences. For a reductive knowledge-first epistemologist who seeks to reduce other epistemic and doxastic *words* to the word ‘knowledge’, the analog worry will be that this approach glosses over too many linguistic differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, the extensive criticism of E = K (Schiffer 2009, McGlynn 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g. Fantl and McGrath 2009, 2012, Hawthorne 2004, Stanley 2005, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008. See Brown 2008, 2010, Gerken 2011, 2014, 2015a, *MS a* for elaboration and criticism). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I do not want to repeat myself. So, the presentation will be condensed and rely on other work (Gerken 2011, 2012a, 2014, 2015a, 2015c, *MS*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Compared to (Gerken 2012) there is a slight change in formulation of WASA, and DJA below. It pertains to parenthetical right-to-left direction of the biconditional. But the issue can be set aside here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The list is not exhaustive. But since this is not the place for theory-building, I’ll work with what I’ve got. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Because there are a number of context-determiners, the relationship between stakes and the epistemic position required for assertion (and action) not a simple linear one. For example, the conversational context may also be configured such that high stakes *lower* the warrant-demand on assertion. Among the candidate cases is one in which the relevant costs of improving one’s epistemic position are higher than the relevant costs of asserting something false (see Gerken 2015b, Ms). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I take the notion of reasonability here to be set by the standard of a reasonable interlocutor (cf. Lawlor 2012, Chap. 5). There are similar norms of assertion around. McKinnon sets forth a “supporting reasons” norm according to which the speaker should always be in a position to provide contextually adequate reasons (McKinnon 2015). I regard this requirement as too strong. One may meet the epistemic norm of assertion by possessing mere entitlement that one cannot articulate as reasons. Grice’s formulation is “*Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence* (Grice 1989). I take this to be too “evidentialist.” These are in-house disputes insofar as Grice’s and McKinnon’s norms involve gradable, non-factive epistemic properties (*pace* Benton who argues that Grice’s norm – despite its official formulation – is a knowledge norm (Benton *forthcoming*)). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sosa 2007 and Graham 2012 provide similar distinctions between kinds of knowledge. I elaborate my own epistemic pluralism in Gerken 2013a, 2013b and *forthcoming*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that individuating kinds of knowledge by reference to its source – e.g., knowledge by perception, testimony, memory and so forth – will not do if there are internalist and externalist species of each kind (Gerken 2013b). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For ideas that are broadly congenial to the listed responses, see Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 for the pragmatic encroachment response, Williamson 2000 for the non-epistemic norm response (thanks also to a referee), Ichikawa 2012 for the sufficient reason response, Hawthorne and Stanley 2008 for the knowledge of probability response and Turri 2010, 2011 for the different speech act response according to which the conversational context to bear on the type of speech act rather than, as contextualists, would have it, the content. I take the central problem with this view to be one that Turri attributes to a referee: “the scale of speech acts might not be as fine-grained as the scale of epistemic standards” (Turri 2010a, fn. 24). I address some of these objections in (Gerken *MS*). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is only fair to acknowledge that those who uphold a combination between knowledge norms and pragmatic encroachment have done a reasonable job on this account. I provide some criticism in (Gerken 2011, 2015a and MS). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to Hawthorne, Williamson, Yli-Vakkuri and a referee for helping me better see this aspect of the dialectic clearer. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Note that the stakes pertain to the cuckold husband not the speaker. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This cuts both ways, however. Gettier did teach us something important about knowledge, justification and their relationship. Moreover, the post-Gettier tradition has not been altogether futile. Although it has admittedly produced some epistemological garbage, it has also produced important insights. Epistemic externalism is among them. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the same reason, varieties WASA and DJA are apt to contribute to a strict purist invariantist account of cases that are supposed to motive *pragmatic encroachment* about knowledge or ‘knowledge.’ Doing so is an ambition of Gerken MS. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The quoted phrases are from (Williamson 2013). But it is unclear whether they can be attributed to Williamson who takes them to exemplify “analytic philosophy’s reputation” or attributes them to “analytic philosophers” (Williamson 2013: 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For recent discussions of reflective equilibrium, see (Kelly and McGrath 2010; Walden 2013; Cath *forthcoming*). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Strawson’s book is from 1992 but represents lectures from 1968-1987. The relevant discussion is “virtually unchanged” from 1968 (Strawson 1992: vii). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Even the step from conceptual ontogenesis to conceptual composition is very controversial. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For Reichenbach’s famous distinction and recent work on it, see (Reichenbach 1938 and Schickore and Steinle 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Given some qualifications that I will not go into here. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This line of reasoning extends from concepts to linguistic terms. So, likewise, I am skeptical about the idea that all of the most explanatorily basic epistemic phenomena correspond to vernacular *terms* (see Gerken 2015b). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I mention safety as a candidate without any commitment. This is due to the fact that a number of knowledge-first epistemologists are theorizing about safety in a manner that appears to be compatible with the equilibristic *modus operandi* that I am sketching (Williamson 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This idea was non-commitmentally suggested to me by John Hawthorne. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This idea was non-commitmentally suggested to me by Lizzie Fricker. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. I’m afraid that I have already used my quota of self-citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I mention this because several self-identifying knowledge-first epistemologists have suggested – only half in jest – that knowledge-first epistemology is the conjunction of Williamsonian views in epistemology. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Of course, this not quite what they argue. But just as Columbus was mistaken about the continent that he had encountered, his encounter was nevertheless an important achievement. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. I say a good deal more in (Gerken *MS*). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Compare with Thomson’s famous perspective shift from the rights of the fetus to the rights of a pregnant woman in the debates about the ethics of abortion (Thomson 1971). Whether one ultimately agrees with Thomson’s argument or not, the shift in perspective marks an important intellectual contribution. There are many disanalogies between these cases, of course, and I am not suggesting that they are on a par in all respects. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This is one of the key theses of (Gerken *MS*) in which I provide a number of examples of divergences between folk epistemology and epistemology proper. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For written comments, I am grateful to the trio of editors, an anonymous OUP referee who provided a helpful knowledge-first perspective, Emil Møller and Bob Beddor. The paper was presented at the University of Geneve, Yonsei University and Oxford University (all in the first half of 2014) and I benefitted from the discussions on these occasions (and yet more discussions after another talk in Oxford’s Philosophical Society in 2015). Finally, I am grateful to Timothy Williamson for clarifying some exegetical issues and for several discussions over the years. The paper is dedicated to Teo. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)