

Finding Excuses for J=K

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Abstract: According to J=K, only beliefs that qualify as knowledge are epistemically justified. Traditionalists about justification have objected to this view that it predicts that radically deceived subjects do not have justified beliefs, which they take to be counter-intuitive. In response, proponents of J=K have argued that traditionalists mistake being justified with being excused in the relevant cases. To make this response work, Timothy Williamson has offered a dispositional account of excuse which has recently been challenged by Jessica Brown. She has presented cases in which Williamson's account excuses subjects believing things in an epistemically reckless fashion. To steer clear of Brown's counterexamples, I argue for a modification of Williamson's account that employs a more fine-grained notion of the dispositions involved.

Key words: knowledge-first, epistemic justification, excuses, knowledge norms, new evil demon problem

1. J=K AND THE EXCUSE RESPONSE

Many knowledge-first epistemologists hold that knowledge is the norm of belief (KNB):

KNB One ought to (believe p iff one knows that p).

Some proponents of this view further hold that the norm of belief sets the standard for justified belief. Taken together, KNB and the claim that the norm of belief sets the standard for being justified entail the following claim about epistemic justification:¹

J=K One justifiably believes that p iff one knows that p .

It is not difficult to see that, according to J=K, epistemic justification is factive: only true belief can qualify as knowledge. Thus, J=K prominently entails that reasonable but false beliefs are not justified. Suppose Mary visits a museum and comes across an impressive looking piece of jewellery. The piece shows many characteristics of jewellery made in the Victorian era, so Mary comes to believe that the piece was made during that time. But unbeknownst to Mary, she is looking at an indistinguishable fake. The museum has currently swapped out the original piece after getting tipped off about an imminent robbery. So, Mary's belief that the jewellery is from the Victorian era is false and thus fails to qualify as knowledge. According to J=K, her belief is not justified. Suppose that Mark visits the museum a few days later after the robbery was foiled. He forms the belief that the jewellery is from the Victorian era and, since the original has been swapped back in, comes to know this. According to J=K, his belief is justified.²

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Traditionalists about justification have objected that this verdict goes against intuitions.³ According to the orthodox view, Mary's belief is justified: She has every reason to believe that she is in normal circumstances in which her belief-forming methods are reliable. Being in an uncooperative epistemic environment, i.e., one in which the museum replaced the original piece of jewellery with an indistinguishable fake, does not undermine the "justification-conferring status" (Cohen 1984: 281) of her perception.

Proponents of J=K have responded by arguing that traditionalists confuse two crucially distinct normative categories, namely *being justified* and *being excused*.⁴ Both camps agree that Mary does her best to know the things she believes and follows "exactly the same cognitive instincts" (Williamson forthcoming: 19) as her knowing counterpart Mark. Therefore, she is not blameworthy for forming a false belief. Still, proponents of J=K argue that our "positive reaction" (Littlejohn forthcoming: 4) concerning Mary indicates that her violations of KNB are *excused* but not that she has justified beliefs by complying with some non-factive norm of justification instead.

To avoid charges of adhocery, proponents of J=K must provide an account of excuse (Gerken 2011: 538; Schechter 2017: 148). Timothy Williamson (forthcoming) has offered a dispositional account of excuse which has recently been challenged by Jessica Brown (2018). She has presented cases in which Williamson's account excuses subjects believing things in an epistemically reckless fashion. To steer clear of Brown's counterexamples, I argue for a modification of Williamson's account that employs a more fine-grained notion of the dispositions involved. Doing so is of a more general interest, since Williamson's account can be used to defend other knowledge norms, like the knowledge norm for assertion (Williamson 2000) and reasons for action (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008), against similar cases. I present Williamson's account in section 2 and Brown's counterexamples in section 3. In sections 4 and 5, I show how Williamson's account can be modified to deal with Brown's objection.⁵

2. WILLIAMSON'S DISPOSITIONAL ACCOUNT OF EXCUSE

Williamson's proposal is situated in a tripartite normative structure. At the helm of this structure are *primary norms*. A primary norm N sets the standard of conduct for a certain domain (moral, prudential, epistemic etc.) by distinguishing between cases in which the norm is complied with and those cases in which it is violated. For example, to comply with the norm of promise-keeping, one ought to keep one's promises. To comply with the knowledge norm of belief KNB, one ought to: believe *p* iff one knows *p*. Justification in the domain governed by the norm comes with compliance. If one's ϕ -ing complies with N, then one's ϕ -ing is justified.

Primary norms also generate derivative norms: *secondary norms* penalize not being *disposed* to comply with the primary norm while *tertiary norms* penalize not *acting like someone* who has dispositions to comply with the primary norm. Plausibly, one ought to be disposed to keep one's promises, because being a promise-keeper is conducive to keeping one's promises in a wide range of circumstances. Furthermore, if one is not the kind of person who tends to keep their promises, then one should at least act like such a person, as this will also lead to likely compliance with the norm of promise-keeping.

Williamson (forthcoming: 7) characterizes secondary norms schematically as follows:

Secondary Norm (DN) A subject *S* complies with a secondary norm DN ('D' for 'disposition'), iff *S* has "a *general disposition* to comply with [the primary norm] N, i.e., *S* is "the sort of person who complies with N."

For someone who is not the sort of person who keeps her promises, there is a further derivative norm in place, the tertiary norm ODN, that asks one to at least act like a promise-keeper. Schematically:

Tertiary norm (ODN) A subject *S* complies with a tertiary norm ODN ('O' for 'occurrent') iff *S* does "what someone who complied with DN would do in the situation at issue" (Williamson forthcoming: 9).

The normative significance of the secondary and tertiary norm is derivative from the primary norm. We want people to be promise-keepers and act like them because it leads to compliance with the primary-norm of promise-keeping. They are logically independent from each other, with one exception: compliance with DN entails compliance with ODN (Williamson forthcoming: 9–10). This is because *anything* a DN-compliant subject does in some circumstance is trivially doing what *someone* who is compliant with DN would do. The latter is nothing but to comply with ODN.

With this normative structure at hand, Williamson's account of excuse can be introduced. He proposes that complying with ODN, i.e., doing what someone who has a general disposition to comply with N would do, excuses one in one's violation of N (Williamson forthcoming: 11):

Excuses arise only when one violates the norm. They are pleas in mitigation of the offence. With a good enough excuse, one is blameless but not justified. When one violates N but complies with ODN . . . , one's compliance with ODN is an excuse but not a justification with respect to N.

Accordingly, Williamson's dispositional account of excuse can be put as follows:

Excuse A subject *S* is excused in violating a primary norm N iff *S* complies with the tertiary norm ODN.

The account delivers the correct result for proponents of J=K. Mary does what someone who has a general disposition to comply with KNB would do. Forming beliefs based on perception when nothing appears to be wrong is a disposition to know. Accordingly, Excuse predicts that Mary holding the belief that the jewellery is from the Victorian era is excused in her violation of KNB.

What about cases in which norms come in conflict?⁶ For instance, Williamson (2000: 256) mentions the possibility that the knowledge norm of assertion can be overridden by other norms.⁷ While I don't have the space to engage with this issue here, the proposal is well positioned to deal with conflicting norms: Acting like someone who is disposed to comply with a norm is compatible with being sensitive to other norms and with using available strategies to resolve any conflicts between them.

3. BROWN'S COUNTEREXAMPLES

Brown (2018: 86–89) has recently objected that Williamson's account of excuse makes intuitively wrong predictions in the following kinds of cases:

Anna and Bertrand have each promised to pick up their elderly grandmother at the airport for Christmas. However, both Anna and Bertrand violate their promises because they form false beliefs about how much time it will take to get to the airport. Thus, on this occasion they violate the knowledge norm for belief even though we may suppose that, in general, they are both disposed to conform to the knowledge norm. However, there is an important difference in how they form their beliefs about how long it takes to get to the airport. Anna regularly drives the airport route and has never known it take more than an hour. She believes it will take her no more than an hour and a half maximum. Unfortunately, it's her extreme bad luck that there is an unpredictable motorway pile-up and the entire town is gridlocked for hours, so that her belief is false. By contrast, Bertrand hardly ever drives the route and doesn't bother to gather evidence about how long it would likely take. He is at his workplace Christmas party busy chat-

ting up a colleague. He comes to believe that it'll take half an hour to get to the airport as a result of wishful thinking. In fact, this isn't enough time in normal driving conditions and so unsurprisingly he doesn't arrive in time. . . . Intuitively, Anna's belief has a positive epistemic status which Bertrand's lacks, although neither belief is a case of knowledge.

Intuitively, Anna is excused in her violation of KNB. While she is out of luck this time, forming a belief by making an inductive inference based on a large data set is acting like someone who has the general disposition to know the things they believe. Anna therefore complies with the relevant tertiary norm (OD-KNB). So, Williamson's account correctly predicts that she is excused in her violation of KNB.

Now, Bertrand forms a false belief in very similar circumstances as Anna. By contrast, however, Bertrand forms his belief by wishful thinking: his belief lacks the positive epistemic status Anna's belief has (Brown 2018: 87). Intuitively, he is not excused in his violation of KNB. But this is not what Williamson's account predicts: Bertrand is excused due to the aforementioned fact that compliance with the relevant secondary norm (D-KNB) is sufficient for compliance with the tertiary norm (OD-KNB). If one has the general disposition to comply with KNB, anything one does is something someone who has a general disposition to comply with KNB would do. Since, by assumption, Bertrand has the general disposition to comply with KNB, he acts like someone who complies with D-KNB would act, i.e., he complies with OD-KNB. Thus, according to Excuse, he is excused, which is counter-intuitive.

In what follows, I will propose a change to Williamson's account to avoid Brown-style counterexamples. There are a few possible factors to adjust: Excuse states the condition for being excused in terms of compliance with the tertiary norm ODN and compliance with the tertiary norm ODN, in turn, refers to the secondary norm DN. Given that Williamson's account is nested in this way, it is instructive to isolate the factor that gives rise to the problematic predictions and to adjust it: Either the secondary norm or the tertiary norm is the culprit. It is natural to think that the factor to adjust is the tertiary norm. ODN is the criterion for excuse on Williamson's account and Brown's counterexample shows that complying with it is too easy. Williamson has noticed this difficulty as he anticipates the problematic cases:⁸

The sort of person who complies with N is the sort of person who *normally* complies with N, but may fail to do so in abnormal cases—and perhaps occasionally in normal ones too, because even the best of us can undergo a blip. (Williamson forthcoming: 8)

[D]oing what someone who complies with N would do may be an unhelpfully weak condition, because someone who would comply with N in enough possible situations to count as disposed to comply with N may nevertheless have a blip in the situation at hand and do almost anything. (Williamson forthcoming: 25n5)

On my view, the issue with the tertiary norm originates from its dependence on the *secondary norm*. More specifically, having a general disposition to comply with a primary norm N is compatible with recklessly not complying with N in a narrow set of circumstances. While Bertrand is generally disposed to comply with KNB, he has a blip and recklessly forms a belief in a way that does not tend to yield knowledge.⁹ On Williamson's account, being generally disposed to comply with KNB protects one from being sanctioned for occasional one-offs, allowing the latter to be excused against our intuitive verdict.¹⁰

The most promising factor to adjust is thus the secondary norm. A so adjusted dispositional account of excuse will be developed and argued for in the next sections.

4. FINE-GRAINED SECONDARY NORMS

Epistemic blips can happen to the best of us, even to those who are *generally* disposed to know. Yet, epistemically speaking, there is nothing positive to them. Indeed, no account of epistemic excuse should give beliefs formed by wishful thinking a pass: Unforced errors under normal conditions are not epistemically excusable.

In what follows, I will propose an adjustment to Williamson's account of excuse that avoids counterexamples of the kind discussed. The key change is a more fine-grained view on the disposition at play in the secondary norm. I will proceed in the following steps. First, I will point out that dispositions, in particular the disposition to know, can be multiply realized in quite heterogeneous ways. Second, I will give a formulation of the secondary norm that reflects this fact. Third, I will argue that only particular realizations of the disposition to comply with KNB matter for being excused in violating KNB in some situation. Finally, I will show that the resulting account delivers the right results in cases like Bertrand's.

Dispositions can be multiply realized. For illustration, consider the trait of being coolheaded. There are many different ways to be coolheaded: a monk who meditates extensively and conceives all events as unchangeable elements of his fate is coolheaded, but so is an apathetic person who is just born unfazed by the things happening around him. Both realize being coolheaded, though in very different ways: in the face of trouble, the monk stays coolheaded by meditating and assuring himself of his worldview, whereas the apathetic person stays coolheaded by being insensitive to upsetting influences in the first place. These different ways to realize being coolheaded should be kept distinct.

This observation straightforwardly applies to being disposed to comply with KNB. The disposition to know can also be multiply realized in heterogeneous ways, as there are many different ways to come to know a proposition: believing p if it seems that p in a normal environment, believing p based on reliable testimony that p , believing p by correctly deducing it from a set of premises—these are all ways to know the things one believes. What makes a certain disposition to believe conducive to acquiring knowledge is the way in which the belief is formed. For instance, believing p if it perceptually seems like p in a normal environment is a knowledge-conducive belief-forming method. It is what a *perceptual knower* does. By contrast, believing non- p whenever it perceptually seems like p rarely yields knowledge. Forming beliefs this way does not lead to compliance with KNB.

If this is right, then the general disposition appealed to in secondary norms glosses over significant differences in the ways one can be disposed to comply with primary norms. One way to capture that there is a heterogeneous set of realizations of the disposition to comply with some primary norm N is by replacing the general secondary norm DN by a heterogeneous set of more particular DN -norms. The elements of this set can be defined as follows:

Fine-Grained Secondary Norms (DN_i) A subject S complies with a secondary norm DN_i iff S is disposed to comply with N in a way i .

Stating the secondary norm in a more fine-grained fashion and without appealing to a general disposition gives us a starting point to get the verdict in Brown's counterexamples right. To see why, observe that each of these fine-grained secondary norms DN_1, \dots, DN_n carve out a more narrow space of cases in which they are complied with. This means that there are fewer cases of compliance to offset cases of reckless non-compliance. Each particular secondary norm DN_1, \dots, DN_n by itself is less tolerant towards cases of reckless non-compliance because being disposed to comply with N in *some particular way i* is less tolerant towards blips by someone with the disposition in question.

This makes a difference for cases like Bertrand's. While Bertrand is *generally* disposed to comply with KNB, he is not disposed to comply with KNB in any particular way in the circumstances in question. Wishful thinking is not any particular way to come to know, therefore, wishful thinking is not compatible with being disposed to know in a particular way. However, a one-off

case of wishful thinking is compatible with having a general disposition to know. Thus, Bertrand's deviant behaviour can be compliant with D-KNB, but is not compliant with any of the more fine-grained secondary norms $D\text{-KNB}_1, \dots, D\text{-KNB}_n$.

Next, I will argue that compliance with at least one of these particular secondary norms DN_1, \dots, DN_n is the relevant difference-maker for being excused. The overall argument will then look like this: If fine-grained secondary norms are less tolerant towards reckless non-compliance and acting like someone who complies with a particular secondary norm DN_i is what matters for being excused, then excuses will not be available for subjects like Bertrand when they are epistemically reckless.

5. HOW FINE-GRAINED SECONDARY NORMS MATTER FOR EXCUSE

Consider the following case:

Insular Talent

A mathematician constantly and reliably generates new mathematical knowledge by deduction. He is quite terrible at acquiring knowledge through other means. He mishears things, he is shortsighted and he is gullible. He is *not generally disposed to believe only what he knows*, given that he will believe a lot of false propositions based on unreliable belief-forming methods. Still, he is exceptional at math. While trying to prove a theorem, carefully and focused as always, he gets interrupted by a colleague. The interruption causes him to mix up two variables at a complex part of the proof without him noticing. As a result, he comes to believe a false proposition.

Is he excused in believing this false proposition? Intuitively, he is. Importantly, it does not seem to matter for this verdict that other belief-forming methods he uses often yield false beliefs. They do not prevent him from doing what a good mathematician would do. Belief-forming methods not relevant to mathematics are not taken into consideration when we evaluate mathematical beliefs. All that matters when we evaluate his false belief is that he did what someone would do who has a disposition to know by *deduction*. A disposition to know by deduction is fairly isolated from other ways of acquiring knowledge. Insofar he is able to see what is on his desk, having bad eyesight does not undermine him being a good mathematician. In the same vein, if he was able to distinguish a large number of flowers by smell, then we still would not think more highly of him when it comes to his ability to reliably prove new results. I take it that the case illustrates something quite obvious: particular realizations of the disposition to know are the difference-makers for being excused in some circumstances, not whether one is generally disposed to know.

If this is right, then the tertiary norm ODN and Excuse need to be modified accordingly. Schematically:

Fine-grained Tertiary Norms (ODN') A subject S 's ϕ -ing is in compliance with a tertiary norm ODN' iff there is a DN_i such that (1) ϕ -ing instantiates the way i and (2) ϕ -ing is what someone who complied with DN_i would do in the situation at issue.

Let's bracket condition (1) of (ODN') for now, I will say more about it later. Here is the modified account of excuse:

Excuse' A subject S is excused in violating a primary norm N iff S complies with ODN' .

The adjusted account of excuse avoids Brown-style counterexamples. If we individuate dispositions to comply with KNB by the ways in which this compliance is realized, it becomes clear that

Bertrand's belief formed by wishful thinking does not count as excused. This is because wishful thinking is *not any specific way* to achieve compliance with KNB. Hence, Bertrand does not act like someone who complies with any of the secondary norms and thus does not comply with the relevant tertiary norm OD-KNB'. He is not excused, given Excuse', and intuitively so.

Furthermore, Excuse' still gives Anna a pass, as we would expect. Anna has driven the route a lot of times and thereby has excellent inductive evidence about the length of the trip. She forms a false belief this time only due to an unpredictable motorway pile-up. Making inductive inferences based on a large data set is what an inductive knower would do, i.e., someone who has a disposition to comply with KNB by induction. In other words, she complies with OD-KNB'.

One might object that appealing to ways of compliance with KNB without an account of the latter is too uninformative and ad hoc.¹¹ I will address this worry by sketching such an account in what follows. One natural proposal is that for *i* to be a way of complying with KNB, *i* has to be a belief-forming method that yields knowledge *in normal conditions*. Now, externalists had trouble connecting normal conditions and justification because it is not obvious why normal conditions should matter to an externalist notion of justification commonly assumed to be connected to truth.¹² By contrast, it is natural to think that normal conditions are the mark of excuse: A security guard of an electronics store is obliged to prevent theft, but is entirely excused for failing to do so if confronted by a group of heavily armed robbers. In normal conditions, we expect norm compliance. But excuses are for extraordinary circumstances because dispositions to comply with the relevant norm are formed in normal conditions. Accordingly, ways of complying with KNB are belief-forming methods that yield knowledge in normal conditions. Outside of these conditions, they often will not lead to compliance with KNB: An unpredictable motorway pile-up, fake jewelry in a museum—Anna and Mary are excused in their beliefs because they confront circumstances in which we don't expect their belief-forming methods to yield knowledge. They are excused because they believe what someone who knows by perception or induction in normal conditions would believe. By contrast, Bertrand's wishful thinking is no way of knowing in normal conditions, so he is not excused. Generally speaking, we expect subjects to believe what someone who knows in normal conditions would believe and excuse them if they fail to know in circumstances in which we don't expect them to. While much more could be said here, I hope to have shown that an informative account of ways of compliance with KNB can be developed.

Finally, let's elaborate on the addition of condition (1) in the modified tertiary norm. This addition is necessary to avoid excusing subjects for acting like someone who tends to comply with KNB by using methods not relevant to the circumstances at issue. Reconsider the example of the mathematician. Suppose he gullibly believes something false based on testimony. If the relevant tertiary norm OD-KNB' only included condition (2), the mathematician would implausibly be excused in his belief formed based on testimony. After all, he satisfies (2), independently of the belief-forming method employed in the situation at hand: he acts like someone who has a disposition to comply with KNB by deduction. However, being a good mathematician does not excuse believing gullibly based on testimony. All that matters is the belief-forming method he employs *in the circumstances at hand*. And gullibly believing things he is told is not a way to have a disposition to know by testimony. Condition (1) makes sure that, to be excused, the subject has to do what the right kind of knower would do.

6. CONCLUSION

Let's sum up. Proponents of $J=K$ need an account of excuse to deal with reasonable but false beliefs. Williamson's dispositional account of excuse is open to counterexamples by Brown. I suggested that the relevant dispositions and corresponding secondary norms need to be understood in a more fine-grained fashion and I argued that the resulting account of excuse avoids Brown's counterexamples.

NOTES

1. Proponents of J=K include Sutton (2007), Littlejohn (2013, forthcoming), and Williamson (2013, forthcoming).
2. Many have argued that these local cases are stronger objections to externalism than cases of radical deception involving demons or envatted brains (Gerken 2018: 110–111; Lyon 2013; Madison 2014; McGlynn 2018). I will hence focus on the former although my argument applies to the latter as well. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this to me.
3. Most recently, Cohen and Comesaña (forthcoming). The same traditionalist challenge extends to J=K's failure to deliver the classical analysis of Gettier cases, i.e., as cases of justified true beliefs falling short of knowledge.
4. See Sutton (2007), Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), Williamson (2013, forthcoming) and Littlejohn (2013, forthcoming).
5. Other objections have been made against the excuse manoeuvre more generally that I won't be able to discuss here (Schechter 2017: 150–151; Greco 2019). See also Boulton 2017 for further discussion.
6. Thanks to an anonymous referee for alerting me to this.
7. By contrast, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008: 587) reject this move because they think their knowledge norm governs action generally.
8. Brown (2018: 89–91) also thinks the culprit is ODN. She considers various adjustments to the tertiary norm, only to conclude that there is no plausible way to adjust it to save the dispositional account of excuse.
9. Brown's (2018: 87–88) other counterexample shows the same pattern.
10. One might challenge the view that Bertrand is compliant with D-KNB given that he forms his belief in reckless fashion on a single occasion. This objection, however, presupposes a strict notion of a general disposition, according to which only external interference can prevent a disposition from manifesting itself. Given that there is no obvious external interference in Bertrand's case, one might think that a one-off instance of wishful thinking is incompatible with having a strict general disposition to comply with KNB. We should not operate with such a strict notion of a general disposition: although Williamson at some point discusses interference as causes of deviance (Williamson forthcoming: 8, 15–17), the quotes above suggest that his conception seems to also allow for non-external causes of deviance in normal circumstances. Additionally, if already rarely forming a belief in an inattentive, negligent or reckless way was incompatible with complying with D-KNB, then no one would ever count as having a general disposition to know, which is highly counter-intuitive. In any case, one might take this to indicate that a dispositional account of excuse should not rely on the notion of a general disposition to determine excusability—I agree. One advantage of my adjusted Excuse account is that it implements this lesson.
11. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.
12. See, e.g., Majors and Sawyer 2005: 268–270, McGlynn 2018: 186–187, and Graham 2020: 181–183 on this point.

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