# A FAILED TWIST TO AN OLD PROBLEM: A REPLY TO JOHN N. WILLIAMS

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ABSTRACT: John N. Williams argued that Peter Klein's defeasibility theory of knowledge excludes the possibility of one knowing that one has (first-order) a posteriori knowledge. He does that by way of adding a new twist to an objection Klein himself answered more than forty years ago. In this paper I argue that Williams' objection misses its target because of this new twist.

KEYWORDS: defeasible reasoning, Peter Klein, second-order knowledge, John N. Williams

This is a reply to John N. Williams' paper "Not Knowing You Know: A New Objection to the Defeasibility Theory of Knowledge."[1] That paper argues that Peter Klein's defeasibility theory of knowledge excludes the possibility of one knowing  that one has (first-order) *a posteriori* knowledge. Klein himself answered a version of this objection in "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge."[2] Williams' paper adds a new twist to the objection Klein answered more than forty years ago. I will argue that Williams' objection misses its target because of this new twist.

## 1. The Old Problem and the Old Solution

When fully spelled out, Klein's analysis of knowledge comes down to this:

(Defeasibility) *S* knows that *α* iff (1) *α*; (2) *S* believes that *α*; (3) *S* is justified in believing that *α*; (4) there is no truth, *d*, such that the conjunction of *d* and  *S*s justification, *j*, fails to justify *S* in believing that *α*.[3]

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[3] Since a truth may misleadingly suggest  the falsehood of something one is justified in believing truly (as in the Grabit Case introduced  in  the literature by  Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 225-37. In that case the truth "Tom's mother said that Tom has an identical twin who is also in the library" misleadingly suggests that "Tom stole the book" is false.), Klein's view incorporates a distinction

Towards the end of his paper,[4] Klein considered the following objection to Defeasibility:[5]

> If the definition were accepted, it would never be true that $S$ knows that she knows that $x$ because she could never know that the fourth condition held.

In reply to this objection Klein points out that, given Defeasibility, $S$ knows that she knows $x$ if and only if $S$ knows "$S$ knows that $x$" satisfies each of the necessary conditions in Defeasibility. In other words, $S$ knows that she knows that $x$ if and only if each of the following statements is true:

(I) $S$ knows that $x$

(II) $S$ believes that $S$ knows that $x$

(III) $S$ is justified in believing that she knows that $x$

(IV) There is no truth, $d$, such that the conjunction of $d$ and one's justification, $j$, fails to justify $S$ in believing that $S$ knows that $x$.

As Klein[6] points out, because knowing entails that there is no defeater of one's justification, $S$ is justified in believing she knows that $x$ only if she is justified in believing there is no defeater of her justification for believing that $x$. In other words, III is true only if $S$ is justified in believing there is no defeater of her justification for believing $x$. In the same paper Klein argued that there is no reason to think that $S$ is never justified in believing there is no defeater of the justification she has for her first-order belief.

This, in a nutshell, is Klein's solution to the old problem. Before we look at John Williams' new version of this objection, let me substantiate Klein's reply by

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[4] Klein, "A Proposed Definition," 480.

[5] Even though I follow the argument in Klein, "A Proposed Definition" here, I have updated the nomenclature he used in that paper to a more current one, in line not only with Klein's later work (e.g., Klein, *Certainty* and Peter Klein, "Useful False Beliefs," in *New Essays in Epistemology,* ed. Quentin Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)) but also with more widespread use in current epistemology. The nomenclature in Klein, "A Proposed Definition" followed closely the nomenclature in Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1966). Nothing of substance hinges on these changes.

[6] Klein, "A Proposed Definition," 481.

providing a logically possible case in which I through IV are all true. This should establish that Defeasibility does not exclude second-order knowledge.

As I look up I undergo the experience as of something being a computer screen in front of me. I thereby form the belief that

(p) there is a computer screen in front of me.

Since this is a normal case of perceptual experience, I satisfy all conditions in Defeasibility, i.e.,

(I*) I know that $p$.[7]

Suppose further that I reflect on whether I know that $p$, realize that it is a normal case of perceptual experience, and come to believe I do know it. That is, the following is true:

(II*) I believe I know that $p$.

I* and II* entail that I have a true second-order belief. Now, according to Klein, $S$ is justified in believing that $\alpha$ if and only if, given $S$s evidence, $S$s belief in $\alpha$ satisfies some (perhaps contextually determined) threshold for knowledge-grade justification.[8] This means that I know I have knowledge-grade justification for believing there is a computer screen in front of me only if I know that my justification for believing that there is one is not defeated. But my total evidence bearing on the issue of whether I am justified in believing that $p$ includes not only my knowledge that $p$, but also my knowledge that this is a normal case of perceptual experience, that I am not drugged or otherwise visually impaired, and so on. Thus, we may plausibly argue that, given my evidence, I am in a position to know that there is no defeater of my justification for believing that $p$. Defeaters prevent one from knowing by preventing one's justification from satisfying the (perhaps contextually determined) threshold for knowledge-grade justification. They prevent $S$'s justification from satisfying this threshold by either undermining the support her evidence provides to her belief, or by making probable the denial of what she believes given her evidence.[9] In the case at hand, there would be a

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[7] Although this is a case of *non-inferential* knowledge, the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about *inferential* knowledge.

[8] This is, roughly, what Klein means by his notion of *confirmation*, which is the centerpiece of his account of justification. See Klein, *Certainty*, 61-7.

[9] According to the nomenclature popularized by John Pollock, the first kind of defeater is an *undermining defeater*, while the latter kind of defeater is a *rebutting defeater*. See John Pollock, "Defeasible Reasoning," in *Reasoning: Studies of Human Inference and Its Foundation*, eds. Jonathan Adler and Lance J. Rips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) for a recent statement of Pollock's view.

defeater of my justification for believing that there is a computer screen in front of me if, for example, I had taken a drug which causes hallucinations 80 percent of the time, or if ¬*p* were true. But, by assumption, nothing like that is true in this situation. In other words, both III* and IV* are true:

(III*) I am justified in believing I know that *p*.

(IV*) There is no truth, *d*, such that the conjunction of *d* and my justification, *j*, for believing that I know that *p* fails to justify me in believing that I know that *p*.

Claims I* through IV* all seem to be true in this case; so, it is plausible to think that I know that I know that *p*. The upshot is that Defeasibility does not make it impossible for there to be second-order knowledge. I conclude, then, that contrary to what Williams would have us believe it is logically possible for Klein' Defeasibility to be true and for one to know that one has first-order *a posteriori* knowledge.

## 2. Williams' New Twist

Williams' new twist to the old objection comes in the form of a principle about concepts he finds "plausible:"[10]

(CLAIM) If the satisfaction of a condition at least partly constitutes an instance of a concept, then knowing that such an instance obtains requires you to know *a priori* that the condition is satisfied.[11]

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[10] Williams, "Not Knowing," 215.

[11] Although Williams does not explicitly formulate CLAIM as requiring *a priori* knowledge, one must read CLAIM in this way lest his argument against Klein be made invalid (see below), for Williams explicitly requires that *S* know *a priori* that she satisfies the no-defeater condition in order for her to know that she knows. If I am wrong about this and Williams' argument is invalid, then so much the worse for his argument. More precisely, this is what I take to be Williams' argument:

> 1. If the satisfaction of a condition at least partly constitutes an instance of a concept, then knowing that such an instance obtains requires you to know *a priori* that the condition is satisfied. [CLAIM/Assumption]
> 2. If the satisfaction of a condition at least partly constitutes an instance of *knowledge*, then knowing that such an instance obtains requires you to know *a priori* that the condition is satisfied. [KLAIM/ from 1]
> 3. The satisfaction of the no-defeater condition partly constitutes instances of *knowledge*. [from Defeasibility]
> 4. For any instance *k* of *knowledge*, if you know that *k* obtains in case *C*, then you know *a priori* that the no-defeater condition is satisfied in case *C*. [from 2 and 3]

To get a feel for how CLAIM works, consider Williams' own example:[12] since $x$ being three-sided partially constitutes $x$ being a triangle, I know that $x$ is a triangle only if I know that $x$ is three-sided. Now, CLAIM and Defeasibility together entail that one knows that one knows $\alpha$ only if one knows *a priori* that one's justification satisfies the no-defeater condition. Williams then argues that, since one cannot know *a priori* that one's knowledge that $\alpha$ satisfies the no-defeater condition, one cannot know that one knows that $\alpha$. This is Williams' *new twist* to the old objection: it is not enough that $S$ knows that her first-order knowledge satisfies all conditions on knowledge, if she wants to know that she knows, she must know *a priori* that her first-order *a posteriori* knowledge satisfies all the conditions on knowledge.

Let us look more closely at CLAIM and at Williams' new twist. Our assessment will reveal that CLAIM and the instance of this principle Williams applies to *knowledge* are both false.

Suppose that satisfying the condition

(*) $S$ can prove (some) mathematical theorems

partially constitutes the concept *mathematician*. The assumption is plausible because we commonly think of mathematicians as people who can prove *at least one* mathematical theorem. Now, consider Timmy, who is a freshman in college and not particularly math-savvy. If Timmy were confronted with a proof of a mathematical theorem he would not be able to follow it; he would not even be able to grasp any of the concepts in the proof. Now, suppose Timmy's Calculus professor, a skillful mathematician, satisfies condition (*), and that on the first day of class she tells Timmy and all the other students in Timmy's class that she can prove many mathematical theorems. Intuitively, Timmy knows his teacher is a mathematician even though this concept is partially constituted by condition (*) and his knowledge that the professor satisfies (*) is *a posteriori*, for it is based on his experience as of something being his calculus professor telling him she satisfies (*). But if that is the case, then CLAIM is false on account of the fact that Timmy knows the concept *mathematician* is instantiated by his professor, even though he does not know *a priori* that the professor satisfies a condition that partially constitutes that concept. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that Timmy would know *a posteriori* that his professor is a mathematician even if she had not told the class that she satisfies (*),

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5. You cannot know *a priori* that the no-defeater condition is satisfied in $C$. [Assumption]

You do not know that $k$ obtains in $C$. [from 4 and 5 by *modus tollens*]

12 Williams, "Not Knowing," 215.

but told them only that she is a mathematician. Either version of the case counterexemplifies CLAIM.

Now, consider CLAIM as it applies to *knowledge*:

> (KLAIM)  If the satisfaction of a condition at least partly constitutes an instance of *knowledge*, then knowing that such an instance obtains requires you to know *a priori* that the condition is satisfied.

KLAIM is false because of Williams' new twist. To see that, let us look at what happens when we apply KLAIM to the other traditional conditions on knowledge (i.e., the justification, belief, and truth conditions).

Take justification and belief first. If KLAIM is true, then one cannot know *a posteriori* that those conditions are satisfied. This is a bad result because our second-order knowledge that those conditions are satisfied *is* sometimes justified *a posteriori*. I am completely ignorant of quantum mechanics, but if Stephen Hawking were to tell me that $q$ is a testable prediction of the theory, then, assuming this is a normal case of transmission of knowledge via testimony, I not only come to know that $q$ is a testable prediction of quantum mechanics, but I am also in a position to know both that I believe that $q$ and that I am justified in believing that $q$. The problem for KLAIM is that my justification for believing that I believe that $q$ with justification is arguably *a posteriori*, for it includes the justification that emerges from my undergoing a particular experience: if I had not experienced Stephen Hawking, the celebrated physicist, asserting to me that $q$, I would not have believed that $q$, nor would I have been justified in believing that $q$.

Things get worse when we apply KLAIM to the truth condition on knowledge. Williams faces a dilemma: if KLAIM is true, then, necessarily, either there is no second-order knowledge or no first-order *a posteriori* knowledge. That there is such a dilemma should be reason enough to reject KLAIM and Williams' argument, which relies on it. No epistemology that accepts either (or both) of those horns should be deemed satisfactory.

Here is how KLAIM forces this dilemma on Williams. As before, let "$p$" stand for the claim that there is a computer screen in front of me. Also as before, suppose that I know that $p$ and that I know that $p$ in virtue of my true belief being suitably related to my experience as of something being a computer screen in front of me. As a result, the justification for my knowledge that $p$ is *a posteriori*. Suppose I reflect on the question of whether I know that $p$ and come to believe I do know it in virtue of reliably assessing my perceptual experience as veridical. Now, a condition on knowledge is that the known proposition be true. Because knowledge entails truth, it follows from KLAIM that I know that I know that $p$ only if I know *a priori* that my belief that $p$ satisfies this condition; that is, given KLAIM, I know that I

know that *p* only if I know *a priori* that my belief that *p* is true. But if one knows that a belief is true, then one knows the truth the belief is about. So, given KLAIM, I know that I know that *p* only if *I know a priori that p.* But, by assumption, I know that *p a posteriori*. We have derived a contradiction from KLAIM by applying it to a seemingly innocent case. Something's gotta give. I think KLAIM has got to go. If KLAIM is true, then either my knowledge that *p* is not *a posteriori* or I can't know that I know that *p*. The first horn of this dilemma seems false on its face, and the second one leads to a curious form of skepticism: considering that there is nothing special about this case, the result of this argument generalizes to all cases of first-order *a posteriori* knowledge.

## 3. Conclusion

In sum, John Williams' new twist on the old problem for Defeasibility fails. His problem for Defeasibility arises only when the requirements for iterative knowledge are made too high. What is more, this lesson applies to a number of other views that also incorporate a no-defeater clause in their definition of *knowledge*.[13,14]

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