**Is a belief justified only if it qualifies as knowledge?**

Table of Contents

[Introduction 2](#_Toc520814249)

[Williamson’s View 3](#_Toc520814250)

[Car 4](#_Toc520814251)

[Norms 4](#_Toc520814252)

[Promise case Theory 5](#_Toc520814253)

[Examples of Central and Derivative Norms using the Promise Case Theory and example. 6](#_Toc520814254)

[Promise case 6](#_Toc520814255)

[Chance 6](#_Toc520814256)

[Disguise 6](#_Toc520814257)

[The Epistemological case 8](#_Toc520814258)

[Epistemic case Theory 1 8](#_Toc520814259)

[Negative Epistemic Case Theory 9](#_Toc520814260)

[Epistemic case Theory 2 9](#_Toc520814261)

[Stopped Clock Case 10](#_Toc520814262)

[Sheep Case 11](#_Toc520814263)

[Authors View 11](#_Toc520814264)

[Objections 12](#_Toc520814265)

[Objection 1 12](#_Toc520814266)

[Reply 12](#_Toc520814267)

[Objection 2 13](#_Toc520814268)

[Forming beliefs in good ways 14](#_Toc520814269)

[Conclusion 17](#_Toc520814270)

[Bibliography 18](#_Toc520814271)

# **Introduction**

In this paper I will first examine Williamsons case where he posits that ‘Justified Belief’ is not acceptable to use in the cases where one is deceived in some way, regardless of how the belief has been formed. Williamson aims to eradicate the use of the term ‘justified’ in these cases and instead impose the term unjustified but blameless. I counter this by suggesting that Williamson sets the bar too high to attain knowledge and does not give enough weight to the manner in which beliefs are formed. I then offer another way to describe the situation.

The structure of the essay is as follows: I will present Williamson’s main argument, define his concept of ‘norms’ and present some examples to illustrate this. I will then move on to Williamson’s formulation of blamelessness whilst unjustified in a belief as an alternative to simply justified or unjustified beliefs. I will again illustrate this with examples. Then we will explore some objections to this theory.

# **Williamson’s View**

Williamson states that there are two “assumptions about justified belief…used in explaining what justification is” (Williamson, 2016). Firstly “a belief is justified iff it meets the key normative standard where it is epistemically permissible to hold a certain belief. Second, “the beliefs of a subject in a good case and the corresponding bad case are equally justified” (Williamson, 2016). For example, if I look at my hands I can see them and therefore I am justified in my belief that I have hands, this is the good case. In the bad case I may be a brain in a vat but receive all the relevant inputs that lead me to believe I have hands. Here, I haven’t got any hands and I can’t see them, so I don’t actually know that I have them, but I can still believe that I do so “by the second assumption this belief is equally justified” (Williamson, 2016). In the bad case I have “justified false beliefs” (Williamson, 2016).

Williamson questions the meaning of the phrase “justified belief” and states that recent challenges to Gettier cases have discussed that “the judgement that the true belief in question is not knowledge” (Williamson, 2016), and further still, whether the belief is justified. Williamson thinks that there is a misunderstanding in Gettier cases where the view is that the belief *seems* justified, but this is mistaken for the belief being justified. Williamson quotes an experiment by Nagel, San Juan and Mar, in which the subjects felt empathy with the person in the Gettier case and moved closer towards the belief being justified as a result. This, as Williamson says, is an interesting conclusion that is a person approaches a situation form a first or third person point of view, their decision on whether a belief is justified in a Gettier case is quite different. Williamson states that the term ‘justified’ can be used in a special sense in epistemology and that “lay people must be taught this special sense…before they can engage with the Gettier problem” (Williamson, 2016). Williamson uses the example that if believing you will win a race increases the odds of you winning by 20% then this is pragmatic justification but this is not epistemic justification. Epistemic justification here is technical terminology.

Williamson thinks, that to make the process clearer when discussing epistemic justification, we must identify the relevant epistemic norms to the problem at hand. In order to do this, “we must be sensitive to standard normative distinctions, such as that between Justification and Blamelessness” (Williamson, 2016). This is shown in the following example:

### *Car*

A driver kills a child that runs out into the road. (Williamson, 2016)

In this example, a driver may be blameless without being justified.

If we go back to the brain in the vat example, we can then apply the same principle to ask whether the brain in the vat justified or blameless in the false belief that it has hands. If I look at a stopped clock am I justified or just blameless in believing, through no fault of my own, that the time displayed is correct. This would depend, Williamson thinks, on the norms in play in this situation. Let us examine what a norm might constitute.

## **Norms[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Norms are like rules in a game such as chess, they illustrate where the situation complies with it and where the situation does not comply with it. An explicit norm is that of promise keeping, illustrated below.

When we think of a promise case we think of a situation where X promises Y something and delivers on that promise. For example, “if I promise to be in London on Monday then I comply with the norm of promise-keeping in respect to that promise iff I am in London on Monday… If for whatever reason I am not in London on Monday then I violate the norm of promise keeping” (Williamson, 2016). If we break this process down, we get the following. If I try very hard to keep my promise but I don’t keep it then I have still violated the norm of promise keeping. If I had promised to try very hard to be in London on Monday then this would be a completely different promise. The alternative case is that I forgot to be in London on Monday but by chance I end up in London on Monday then I have not violated the norm of promise keeping but I have complied with the norm unintentionally. Here one might say, well you promised to be in London but you made no effort to get there. Something seems amiss with this situation. The effort required to keep a promise is secondary to keeping ones promise. Therefore, we have two distinct aspects of promise keeping. The first and primary aspect that entails you keep your promise and a second aspect which entails you making some effort to keep that promise. It is clear that keeping the promise is primary to that of making the effort to keep the promise. This renders the effort required to keep the promise as secondary to keeping the promise. It is clearer to see this broken down logically as below:

## Promise case Theory

1. Keep promise (Central Norm)

DP. To be a promise keeper (Derivative norm)

DP’. To do what promise keeper would do (Second Derivative norm)

(Williamson, 2016)

In order to keep a promise, we must be a promise keeper and make some effort to keep our promises. As Williamson states “if we violate P then one breaks a promise, if one violated DP, for accidental reasons, one might still never break a promise so P has the contractual quasi- status of a promise” (Williamson, 2016). We can now move from the promise keeping norm description to an example of how this might play out in life.

## **Examples of Central and Derivative Norms using the Promise Case Theory and example.**

### *Promise case*

*I (S) promise to return £10 that I borrowed from you (P) by Friday. I borrowed the cash to buy a drink at a pub when the cashpoint wasn’t working. I go to your house on Friday to return the money and I knock on your door and return the money to you.*

I can only comply with the norm of promise keeping iff I return your £10 on Friday. If I don’t return your £10 on Friday then I do not comply with the norm of promise keeping. Even if I have an excuse or I arrive at 00:01 on Saturday I am still not complying with the central promise keeping norm and have broken my promise. How does this work if I break the central norm by accident, this is illustrated below.

### *Chance*

*I (S) promise to return £10 that I borrowed from you (P) by Friday. I borrowed the cash to buy a drink at a pub when the cashpoint wasn’t working. I completely forget my promise to return the money but bump into you at a local library on Friday and remember to give you your money back there and then.*

Here I have broken the derivative norms of doing what a promise keeper would do. I have not made any effort to return the money and indeed forgot to do so. However, by a lucky encounter I keep my promise so I have not violated the central norm and have kept my promise. There seems to be something amiss here as the person has broken the secondary norms but by chance still fulfilled the central norm.

There is a third situation here though where I fail to comply with the norm due to an abnormal case.

### *Disguise*

*I (S) promise to return £10 that I borrowed from you (P) by Friday. I borrowed the cash to buy a drink at a pub when the cashpoint wasn’t working. I go to your house on Friday to return the money and I knock on your door. Unbeknownst to me you have a Twin (Q) who says thankyou and takes the money and then I leave. I have fulfilled returning the money and I think I returned it to the right person (P).*

If I promised to return your £10 by Friday but now I want to give it to Q instead. You and Q are perfect images of each other. However, being a promise keeper, I give the money to Q believing them to be you. I have then broken my promise but I have been deceived. Here I have done what a promise keeper would do and I have kept the promise for all intents and purposes. I haven’t been drinking the money away at a pub and I did turn up on Friday and give the money to who I thought was P. The central norm here is still broken even though the situation seems like something unfair has happened because I have been deceived.

The parts here that somehow seem wrong do so because “if it is bad not to keep a promise, then there is also something bad about not being disposed to keep ones promises, and something bad about not doing what someone so disposed would do” (Williamson, 2016). This, however, does not mean the norms have equal status, as explained before. This then brings out the differences between justifications and excuses that so confused the experimental participants earlier. “We consider justification with respect to a given norm; although moral justification may be an all thigs considered matter” (Williamson, 2016). Epistemic justification treats justification in respect to a given norm. Therefore, “one is only justified if and only if one complies with that norm” (Williamson, 2016). Excuses then only arise when the norm is violated. Excuses mean one is blameless but not justified. Let us next examine the concept of blamelessness.

**Blamelessness**

Williamson states that “justification is neither necessary or sufficient for blamelessness” (Williamson, 2016). This is because in the example, *disguise*, the promise keeper breaks the promise central norm but is blameless. This is because the promise keeper was tricked into believing your twin was you and so gave them the money in good faith. In the case, *chance*, Justification is not sufficient for blamelessness because I am justified as I have kept my promise and complied with the central norm, but I have not complied with the secondary derivative norms which state that I should act like a promise keeper. This makes me blameworthy. Let us therefore, discuss the term ‘justification’ with relation only to the central norm. Consequently, the term

‘justification’ is not relevant in the cases of any derivative norms. If I give the money to your twin instead, even by accident, then what I have is an excuse for my behaviour – not a justification.

## **The Epistemological case**

We can then take what we have developed above and apply it to the epistemological case.

Williamson coins the term ‘truth-related norms’ (Williamson, 2016).

If we use the framework above we find ourselves with the following framework:

## Epistemic case Theory 1

1. Ones Beliefs should be true (Central Norm)
2. One’s belief should constitute knowledge (Derivative norm)
3. One’s beliefs should be probable on evidence
4. One’s beliefs should be consistent (Second Derivative norm)

(Williamson, 2016)

Here Williamson attempts to impose a standard level of truth onto the belief system. A Brain in a vat would violate 1 but would not violate 3 because in its own way it is basing the belief on the available evidence. Trying very hard to comply with any of the points 1-4 above “is neither necessary of sufficient for complying with it” (Williamson, 2016). “As a minimal requirement, we may stipulate that a norm for belief counts as truth related only if it excludes belief in an explicit contradiction” (Williamson, 2016). The norms above meet this condition as shown below in the contradicting case.

## Negative Epistemic Case Theory

1. A contradiction cannot be true
2. A contradiction cannot be known
3. The belief has probability of zero
4. It is inconsistent

(Williamson, 2016)

If we equate this to the promise keeping case above we can write the epistemic case as follows:

## Epistemic case Theory 2

1. Believe only what you know (Central Norm)

DJ. To be person who knows stuff or a person who tends to believe only what they know (Derivative norm)

ODJ. Be a person who believes what a person such as 2 would believe (Second Derivative norm)

Those who earlier were taking sympathy as a reason for justification would also her “probably feel some sympathy for DJ and ODJ too as norms of belief, even if in the end they give primacy to J” (Williamson, 2016). They might be tempted to call the belief ‘justified’ if someone complies with DJ and ODJ, but as we have shown above, Williamson thinks that only compliance with J is the true sense of justification.

Williamson states that a strong externalist “norm for belief is that one should believe p only if one knows p” (Williamson, 2016). This means it is wrong to believe p when one does not know p. If we take this a norm for justified belief then, going back to the brain in the vat, the brain in the vat’s belief that it has hands is unjustified. It has an excuse for believing so but the belief is false. The brain complied with all of the derivative norms such as being “of good cognitive character...the right general cognitive dispositions” (Williamson, 2016) and therefore formed its belief with no reason to doubt that it was wrong. The brain is therefore blameless but still unjustified. We only have two options to give the brain here, either that it is justified or unjustified, once the addition of a category of blamelessness is available, Williamson thinks, “more than charity is needed to make the case for classifying the brain in the vat’s beliefs as justified” (Williamson, 2016). Let us now examine further sceptical cases.

**Williamson and Sceptical Scenarios**

When people come across sceptical scenarios we should still expect them to comply with DJ and ODJ, even if they violate J. “Although most of their beliefs are false, and so not knowledge, we may assume that they are still the sort of people whose beliefs are normally knowledgeable and so normally true” (Williamson, 2016). Even though they have false beliefs the person would normally be the type of person who would have consistent beliefs based on good evidence. This, as Williamson states earlier, leads the average person to feel sympathy with the actor in a sceptical scenario and label the belief of the actor as ‘justified’ because they comply with the derivative norms despite having something unlucky happen to them in the sceptical scenario.

The justified true belief analysis of knowledge, in Williamsons view, allows for justified untrue belief. We could say that people analysing sceptical scenarios are as justified in their beliefs as they are in in good cases because we are complying with DJ and ODJ and forming beliefs on a sound basis, which would otherwise lead to a correct belief. It does not matter however, how hard you tried to reach the central norm if, in the end, you did not reach it.

Let us now turn to sceptical scenarios. Sceptical scenarios were brought to the fore by Gettier in 1963 (Gettier, 1963). They have been a problem in the world of epistemology since then and show no signs of being resolved. Gettier cases show the situation where a person has formed a belief via good processes in a good and reliable way. In any other case, there person would be correct in their judgement but here, due to some abnormal issue, the person is not correct and therefore judged by Williamson to know have a justified belief. The following are examples of these types of cases.

## **Stopped Clock Case** [[2]](#footnote-2)

*Suppose S truly believes its noon as a result of looking at a clock that correctly reads noon. However, unbeknownst to S this clock broke exactly twelve hours prior.*

Even though S has good reasons to believe its noon and S’s belief is true, S does not know its noon since S is lucky that her belief is true. Williamson argues that you might have reasons to believe that the clock is not stopped when it is indeed stopped. If you are competent in reading a clock, then there is no reason to think that something else is going on. So, you form belief on that basis and you are unjustified in this belief, but you are also blamelessness. Williamson suggests in the stopped clock Gettier cases there is no knowledge. Williamson adds the blamelessness aspect to the argument to illustrate that we can form unjustified beliefs, but we may have formed them under good conditions. This does not lead to a justified belief, merely and unjustified one with the addition of blamelessness because you weren’t to know that the clock has stopped. Another example of this would be the Sheep Case.

#### **Sheep Case**

*I am walking in a field and I see a sheep. I look at it and think- that sheep is a fine sheep. Unbeknownst to me this is a dog dressed up as a sheep, albeit very convincingly. Behind this imposter is a sheep.*

My thought that there is a sheep present is luckily correct. As a person who normally can recognise a sheep we had good evidence for believing that we indeed see a sheep. However, we were deceived, and this is not a sheep. Therefore, in this example again we have broken the central norm but have complied with the derivative norms. Therefore, Williamson says we are not justified in believing that the Dog is a Sheep but that we are blameless.

**Authors View**

So, if we then say that the beliefs in the epistemic case and the beliefs in the sceptical case are equally justified then we are faced with a problem. Williamson addresses this using the “strong externalist belief…that one should believe p only if one knows p” (Williamson, 2016). “The term ‘justification’ as used in epistemology, is supposed to express a centrally important norm for belief” (Williamson, 2016).

If we take this as a standard for justified belief, i.e. it is wrong to believe P if we don’t know P, then we put ourselves in a difficult position depending on our definition of knowledge. In the brain in the vat example the Brain is unjustified because it does not have the knowledge that it has hand, in Williamsons view it only has a very good excuse to think it has hands. The Brain complied with all the derivative norms and is a brain that usually has consistent views based on evidence and could not reasonably know that the belief was unjustified. However, the belief is unjustified and the Brain is blameless on this count.

# **Objections**

## **Objection 1**

The brain in the vat is doing better than just blamelessness because it is following a good cognitive method. If, however, the brain believed it did not have hands then we would be surprised because the brain has no evidence to believe it does not have hands. If the brain is forming beliefs in a good way and doing this in the same way in which it forms a belief I a good case then the brain in the vat must be justified to the same degree in both good and bad cases.

## **Reply**

The person in the sceptical scenario in the last section also forms a belief in a good way and in the way, they would do in a good case. They comply with DJ and ODJ, but this general way in which we form beliefs does not counter the fact that we have not complied with the central norm and formed the correct belief. Therefore, this is not sufficient for justification to be present.

## **Objection 2**

Williamson argues that we believe with justification iff we have knowledge. Cases such as the stopped clock, Williamson says we are blameless but are unjustified in our beliefs. However, we are at risk if we put the definition of knowledge so high that we cannot each it. If we have a justified belief based on evidence and consistency then that surely constitutes knowledge. What other step might we make to get to knowledge from a justified belief if we cannot equate knowledge to justified belief. There is a case that does not require the large jump between belief and knowledge that I set out below. We have the following steps

1. Knowledge
2. Cases that are justified but where we don’t have knowledge (Such as the stopped clock case)
3. No justification is present (i.e. brainwashing)

We now have 3A which states we can be blameworthy or blameless.

Williamson adds in 3A in order to open a new category to people that are sympathetic with the brain in the vat. This gives them a way out to say the brain is unjustified but blameless instead of feeling bad that they have to label the brain in the vat as merely unjustified. Williamson’s claim is quite strong where he states that there is no knowledge in the stopped clock case. People wanting to be sympathetic to the brain in the vat would want to say that the brain has a justified belief[[3]](#footnote-3) as the belief was formed in the correct way. If we examine this in terms of competence, someone who can read a clock would have no reason to think that the clock has stopped five minutes ago. Justification and blamelessness are different in the way that in Gettier cases justification is present and not in the case where a person is engaging in wishful thinking, who is blameworthy. Someone who is being brainwashed may be told by their community that it is a good way to believe but one doesn’t know any better. When someone forms beliefs in bad ways or it is out of their control we have reason not to blame them but they have formed their beliefs in a bad way which shows no connection between truth and knowledge. However, in Gettier cases the person forms the belief in a good way, that would otherwise lead to good beliefs. This shows a connection between truth and knowledge and forming beliefs in a good way. There seems to be a distinct difference in case here. Therefore, I believe that there is a weaker case than Williamson presented that is more plausible. and we shall examine this next.

## **Forming beliefs in good ways**

Knowledge can be seen as separate to justified belief. We must justify belief but knowledge is less sophisticated. Animals have knowledge but can’t have justified beliefs as they lack the capacity to justify their beliefs. If we believe permissibly then we are believing for good reason. We have satisfied DJ and ODJ and have followed the correct ways to form a belief as well as being the type of person that forms beliefs in the correct way. We could state that believing p for good reason can only happen if we know p. To have a permissible belief a person might be caught in a sceptical case where they are looking at a dog dressed as a sheep. In every other case of looking at a sheep like thing they would be correct in stating that it is a sheep. This belief would have been formed on good evidential grounds and by a person consistent in their beliefs. This would be enough to make the belief permissible. To put this in a logical fashion we can examine this below:

1. KP (Permissible Knowledge)≡PBp (Permissible Belief)
2. JBp (Justified Belief) ≡PBp (Permissible Belief)
3. Therefore KP≡JBP (Framework discussed in epistemology class)

If we compare this with Williamsons epistemic norm theory form before[[4]](#footnote-4) we can see that Williamson agrees that we should have consistent, well founded, evidentially supported beliefs, however, Williamsons does not believe that the combination of the three derivative norms can in any way mean that the central norm has been achieved. One wonders how one would know they had been deceived if they had formed the beliefs in this robust way and therefore what extra stipulation would be needed to fulfil the central norm. What standard could be put in the theory to ensure that one has not been deceived and indeed that their belief is true. I think the only way we can form good beliefs if by fulfilling the derivative norms and then attaining the central norm. As we have seen above, if we do not fulfil the derivative norms then things can go quite wrong or seem wrong.

If we have move away from knowledge as a justified belief and towards knowledge as a permissible belief it seems that we have more latitude to discuss the way we form beliefs and the role they play in attaining the central norm. If we believe permissibly then we believe for good reason. So, if P sees the dog dressed as a sheep and forms the belief that they are seeing a sheep in a good way and, in all other circumstances, that would lead to them holding a correct belief, then we can say that P believes permissibly. This addresses the layperson issues that Williamson discusses earlier in the paper where Williamson thinks the lay person is too lenient in allowing P to be said to hold a justified belief. In this framework P has permissible knowledge and therefore, a permissible belief. This then extends to knowledge. Williamson states that we can only have knowledge if we have a justified belief. Here we can have permissible knowledge because we hold a permissible belief. So, the result of this is that permissible knowledge equates to justified permissible belief. We only know something here if we justifiably believe it. The distinction here is because the conditions to satisfy the definition of actual knowledge in Williamson’s paper are so high that they are seemingly unattainable or rule out someone forming a good belief based on following a good route and using the available evidence Williamson’s definition of knowledge can therefore seem too strong. The framework above dilutes this slightly so that we can satisfy the conditions for knowledge based on having a robust belief. There is much to say on the route we take to come to our beliefs and which ways are good or bad. Williamson touches on this at the end of his paper and cites the behaviour of a rational person as being a benchmark. However, for these purposes we can simply state that if P thinks he sees a sheep, and in all other circumstances this would most likely be a sheep, then he had formed the belief in a good way.

## **Williamson’s reply**

Williamson would reply here that it does not matter how we form the belief, unless we comply with the central norm then we have broken it. As he states, the central norm in the epistemological sense is that Ones Beliefs should be true. Here, Williamson believes that the belief, however well intentioned it is, or however good a route it has been reached by, is wrong because it is ultimately false.

# **Conclusion**

Williamson’s recent work posits that justified belief is knowledge. However, Williamsons ‘knowledge first’ claim[[5]](#footnote-5) does appear to be very strong.

In the stopped clock case Williamson argues that you might have reasons to believe that the clock is not stopped when it is indeed stopped. If you are competent in reading a clock, then there is no reason to think that something else is going on. So, you form belief on that basis and you are unjustified in this belief but you are also blameless. Williamson[[6]](#footnote-6) suggests in the stopped clock Gettier cases there is no knowledge but adds the blamelessness aspect to the argument to illustrate that we can form unjustified beliefs, but we may have formed them under good conditions. This does not lead to a justified belief, merely an unjustified one with the addition of blamelessness because you weren’t to know that the clock has stopped. The conditions to satisfy the definition of actual knowledge in Williamson’s paper are so high that they are seemingly unattainable or rule out someone forming a good belief based on following a good route and using the available evidence Williamson’s definition of knowledge can therefore seem too strong. My suggested framework above dilutes this slightly so that we can satisfy the conditions for knowledge based on having a robust belief. There is much to say on the route we take to come to our beliefs and which ways are good or bad. Williamson touches on this at the end of his paper and cites the behaviour of a rational person as being a benchmark. However, for these purposes we can simply state that if P thinks he sees a sheep, and in all other circumstances this would most likely be a sheep, then he had formed the belief in a good way.

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1. Williamson here applies the word ‘norm’ liberally to anything that yield an ‘ought’ or a ‘should’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gettier, E.L., 1963. Is justified true belief knowledge? *analysis*, *23*(6), pp.121-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a non-epistemic sense according to Williamson [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ## Epistemic case Theory 1

   1. Ones Beliefs should be true (Central Norm)
   2. One’s belief should constitute knowledge (Derivative norm)
   3. One’s beliefs should be probable on evidence
   4. One’s beliefs should be consistent (Second Derivative norm)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McGlynn, A., 2014. *Knowledge first?*. Springer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Williamson, T., 2016. Justifications, excuses, and sceptical scenarios. *The New Evil Demon. Oxford University Press. In Press. Draft online (2 June, 2016) from http://www. philosophy. ox. ac. uk/members/philosophy\_panel/tim\_williamson*, *4*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)