

## On Putting Knowledge ‘First’

To appear in J. Adam Carter, Emma C. Gordon, and Benjamin Jarvis (eds.), *Knowledge First: Approaches to Epistemology and Mind*, forthcoming, Oxford University Press

Draft (9 January, 2015)

Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa and C.S.I. Jenkins<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

There is a New Idea in epistemology. It goes by the name of ‘knowledge first,’ and it is particularly associated with Timothy Williamson’s book *Knowledge and Its Limits*. In slogan form, to put knowledge first is to treat knowledge as basic or fundamental, and to explain other states—belief, justification, maybe even content itself—in terms of knowledge, instead of vice versa. The idea has proven enormously interesting, and equally controversial. But deep foundational questions about its actual content remain relatively unexplored. We think that a wide variety of views travel under the banner of ‘knowledge first’ (and that the slogan doesn’t help much with differentiating them). Furthermore, we think it is far from straightforward to draw connections between certain of these views; they are more independent than they are often assumed to be.

Our project here is exploratory and clarificatory. We mean to tease apart various ‘knowledge first’ claims, and explore what connections they do or do not have with one another. Our taxonomy is offered in §2, and connections are explored in §3. The result, we hope, will be a clearer understanding of just what the knowledge first theses are. We conclude, in §4, with some brief suggestions as to how we think the various theses might be evaluated.

We begin though, in §1, with a brief summary of the historical context in which the knowledge first programme arose. This will provide insights into what exactly the programme is, by disentangling elements of the tradition to which it is a reaction.

### *§1. A Quick History*

To begin, we want to offer a brief recap of a certain now-(in)famous portion of the history of epistemology. We imagine that the majority of this summary will be familiar to many of our readers; however, as our subsequent discussion will pick up various strands and themes from this section, it is important that we describe the relevant background explicitly before proceeding. Our story is certainly an oversimplification in some ways, but it should be sufficient for our purposes in this paper.

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors contributed equally; names are given in alphabetical order.

During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was widely held that analytic philosophy was in the business of finding *analyses*. We shall address the question of just what counts as an ‘analysis’ in a moment. For now, it is enough to note that the project of finding a correct analysis was often pursued by way of presenting putative sets of *necessary and sufficient conditions* for something. Analyses so expressed could then be criticised by identifying putative counterexamples, whether actual or merely possible.

The canonical history of epistemology has it that prior to 1963, it was widely assumed that the correct analysis of knowledge was the view now known as the ‘standard’ analysis, or the ‘JTB’ analysis (for ‘Justified True Belief’). The standard analysis of knowledge says that for any subject *S* and any proposition *p*, the following are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for *S* knows that *p*:

1. *p*
2. *S* believes that *p*
3. *S* is justified in believing that *p*.

Precursors of this view are sometimes attributed to Plato, who says in the *Meno* that knowledge is distinguished from mere true belief in being ‘tied down’, so that it cannot easily escape or be lost as mere true belief can. Views more closely resembling the above formulation of the JTB analysis are attributed by Edmund Gettier to Roderick Chisholm and A. J. Ayer.<sup>2</sup>

In 1963, Gettier published a short paper in which he described some possible situations which he claimed were counterexamples to the sufficiency direction of the standard analysis of knowledge: that is, cases where conditions 1-3 are all met but where *S* nevertheless does not know that *p*. The cases Gettier described were situations in which *S* held a justified true belief which was inferred from a justified false belief. These cases were widely accepted as cases of JTB without knowledge, and thus as providing a decisive refutation of the JTB analysis.

In response to Gettier’s counterexamples, which involve *S* deriving a justified true belief from a justified false one, new analyses of knowledge were developed, specifically designed to block these counterexamples. These often took the form of ‘JTB+X’ analyses, the idea being that each of 1-3 in the standard analysis is a genuinely *necessary* condition on knowledge, but 1-3 are not jointly *sufficient* for knowledge (as demonstrated by the counterexamples), so a fourth condition needs to be added. Of particular note here is the ‘No False Lemmas’ (hereafter ‘NFL’) analysis (see e.g. Clark 1963):

1. *p*

---

<sup>2</sup> Neither of those authors phrased their conditions for knowledge exactly this way. The now-usual formulation, in terms of justification, is so in large part *because* of Gettier 1963. As Dustin Locke reminds us, Kaplan 1985 argues that the canonical history is inaccurate for this reason.

2. *S believes that p*
3. *S is justified in believing that p*
4. *S's belief that p is not inferred from any falsehood*

In response to the NFL analysis, further problem cases were developed, in which S's justified true belief is not inferred from a false belief but arrived at in some other way. For example, Carl Ginet's now-famous fake barn case<sup>3</sup> was offered as a case of justified true belief without knowledge, but one there in which there is no false belief from which S's belief in the target proposition is derived. In response, epistemologists attempted to articulate different 'fourth conditions', or to complicate their analyses further.

In addition to these challenges to the *sufficiency* of JTB and the various JTB+Xs, some challenges were made to the *necessity* of the individual J, T and B conditions. In particular, some challenged the justification condition, and proposed new tripartite analyses with the justification condition replaced with something else. One well-known suggestion made by Alvin Goldman (see e.g. Goldman 1967) is that S knows that p iff:

1. *p*
2. *S believes that p*
- 3'. *S's belief that p was causally connected [in the right sort of way] to the fact that p.*

Another (see e.g. Goldman 1976)<sup>4</sup> is that S knows that p iff:

1. *p*
2. *S believes that p*
- 3''. *S's belief that p was formed by a reliable method.*

The causal and reliabilist analyses of knowledge could be regarded as versions of a JTB analysis, if 3' or 3'' is accepted as equivalent to 3 (i.e. as *spelling out* what justification amounts to). However, causal connectedness and reliability conditions can alternatively be understood as *replacing* the justification condition.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The case was made famous by Goldman 1976. Goldman later attributed it to Ginet. See e.g. Goldman (2009), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Reliabilism was first suggested long before Gettier's 1963 paper, by Frank Ramsey in 1931. But it is employed as a response to Gettier by Goldman.

<sup>5</sup> See Kornblith (2008) for discussion.

New (putative) counterexamples continued to appear in response to the various proposed analyses of knowledge (see Shope 1983 for a detailed survey). Eventually, however, the whole project of proposing new analyses and then presenting new counterexamples to them was called into question.

Linda Zagzebski (1994) influentially argued that counterexamples broadly similar to those of Gettier could be produced in response to any putative analysis of knowledge meeting certain conditions, and provided a recipe for the construction of such counterexamples. The conditions were that the proposal be of the form JTB+X, with X logically independent of truth. The recipe for producing a counterexample to such an analysis involves two steps: first, think of a case in which S's belief in  $p$  is justified, and condition X is met, but  $p$  is false, then alter the case to one in which  $p$  is true but only by luck.

A few years later, Edward Craig (1999) argued for the inappropriateness of *any* attempt to analyse knowledge, citing as evidence the failure (as he saw it) of the post-Gettier project:

[I]f the standard approach runs into difficulties—and the work of the last twenty-five years makes it apparent that it does—it is surely worthwhile to try to think of another. (Craig 1999, p. 1)

Craig takes the post-Gettier literature, as well as the history of scepticism, to suggest that what he calls the *intuitive extension* of the concept of knowledge (i.e. the collection of cases to which the concept intuitively applies) is in serious tension or perhaps outright conflict with the *intuitive intension* of the concept (i.e. our intuitive ideas about what the criteria for knowing are). If this is so, he says, then the project of analysis is hopeless and should be replaced with something else. Craig proposes 'creeping up on the concept of knowledge' (p. 3) by first asking 'what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be', and then figuring out 'what a concept having that role would be like' (p. 2). This way, he suggests, we can get some illumination of the concept we actually have, even if that concept is vague and/or inconsistent and hence resistant to analysis in the traditional sense involving the pursuit of necessary and sufficient conditions.

Developing the trend begun by Zagzebski and Craig, Williamson (2000) also expresses scepticism about the project of analysing knowledge into necessary and sufficient conditions. But Williamson finds a different *moral* in the failure (as he sees it) of the analytic project. Williamson diagnoses the problem as an error in order of explanation: where the traditional analytic project attempts to analyse knowledge into component features (truth, belief, justification, etc.), Williamson argued that epistemologists should instead take knowledge as primitive, or basic, and use *it* to understand other things. This is the headline news of Williamson's 'knowledge first' approach to epistemology.

It is our purpose in this paper to get a better sense about what being 'first' might amount to in such a context, and hence pin down a few possible things one might mean by calling oneself a 'knowledge first' epistemologist. We shall investigate some of the things that

Williamson himself might mean by ‘knowledge first’, but our focus is not on exegesis; our aim is to get clear about the options.

In order to do this, we now return to the deferred task of discussing exactly what an ‘analysis’ of knowledge, in the traditional sense, was supposed to be. One thing to note is that ‘analysis’ is not the only word used to describe the traditional project involving the pursuit of necessary and sufficient conditions. Sometimes the traditional proposals are referred to as ‘analyses’, but at other times they may be called ‘accounts’ or ‘theories’ of knowledge, with this sort of terminological difference typically going unremarked upon.<sup>6</sup> When the project is explicitly described as ‘analysis’, it is sometimes said to be an analysis *of knowledge* and other times an analysis of *the concept of knowledge*; again, this difference is not often remarked upon.<sup>7</sup> When it was a concept being analysed, there would also often be talk of analysing the meaning of the *word* ‘know’, perhaps because it was assumed that the word meaning is identical with (or good evidence concerning) the concept.<sup>8</sup> Gettier himself wrote of ‘definitions’ of knowledge. With the benefit of hindsight (and of e.g. Kornblith 2007) we can see that it is highly problematic to assume that investigating one’s concept of knowledge is the same thing as investigating knowledge; in the same way, one can raise serious concerns about how much word meanings have to do with either knowledge or the concept of knowledge.

Given these complexities, in interpreting this stage in the history of epistemology we should allow for the possibility that there was not really *a single traditional project*. It might be more accurate to say that multiple projects were being pursued within that tradition, but these were not on the whole clearly distinguished from one another.

Be that as it may, whatever was going on, the search for necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of *S knows that p* was part of it. But not just any old set of necessary and sufficient conditions would do. It was obviously not permissible to offer {*S knows that p*} as the relevant set of conditions; such ‘circular’ conditions were considered unacceptable. An obvious way to be circular in the relevant sense is to include knowledge explicitly in the proffered conditions, but accounts would also be subject to criticism if the conditions were couched in terms considered to be ‘less basic’ than knowledge itself.

What might basicness amount to here? One possibility is metaphysical priority, of a kind currently associated with notions like *grounding*, *dependence*, and the *in virtue of* relation. Another possibility is the kind of psychological priority we might associate with the idea that we apply the concept KNOWS<sup>9</sup> to a situation only *via* an application of the

---

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. p. 33 (‘analysis’) vs. p. 19 (‘account’) of Williamson 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. p. 5 vs. p. 8 of Williamson 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Craig 1999, p. 1: ‘The standard approach to questions about the concept of knowledge has for some time consisted in attempts to analyse the everyday meaning of the word ‘know’ and its cognates. Such attempts have usually taken the form of a search for necessary and sufficient conditions ...’

<sup>9</sup> We’ll use SMALL CAPS to indicate reference to concepts and ‘single quotes’ to indicate reference to words. We use words by typing them.

concept BELIEVES. Yet another possibility is conceptual priority of the sort associated with conceptual composition (the idea of one concept being composed of others). There is also a kind of temporal priority to be considered; perhaps the *order in which we learn things* is relevant to what counts as ‘more basic’ than what.

There may be interactions and interrelationships between these various kinds of basicness; for example, if we learn what *belief* is before we learn what *knowledge* is, perhaps that suggests that we learn apply to concept KNOWS via applications of the concept BELIEVES. Be that as it may, the different kinds of basicness are different and we should not start out by either conflating them or *assuming* any deep connections between them (e.g., that belief will turn out to be ‘more basic’ than knowledge in either all of these senses or none of them).

Knowledge, the knowledge first epistemologist will say, is not subject to traditional analysis in *more basic* terms; it is unsuitable for *decomposition* into more basic components; it should be treated as the *explanans* rather than the *explanandum*, and so on. It is not what the traditional project took it to be. But since there seem to be multiple different ‘basicness’ claims tangled together in the traditional project(s), we might correspondingly expect to see, not a single clearly identifiable knowledge first thesis, but a tangle of different claims.

In his 2000, Williamson is clearly concerned at some points with the *state* of knowledge—is it a mental state?— at some points with the *word* ‘knows’—is it a factive mental state operator?— and at some points with the *concept* KNOWS—is a hybrid of a mental and a non-mental concept? Which of them is he saying is ‘first’, and in what sense?

It is clear that Williamson at least intends to make some priority claims with respect to *concepts*. He often says that the orthodoxy he is challenging is the view that belief is ‘conceptually prior’ to knowledge (see e.g. pp. 2–3, 5, 8–10) and his discussion of what he sees as the ‘degenerating research programme’ of traditional analysis makes very clear that he thinks that programme is concerned with the analysis of *concepts*. He writes that ‘one would not expect the concept knows to have a non-trivial analysis in somehow more basic terms’ (p. 31).

But Williamson also makes claims about the *word* ‘knows’ that concern unanalysability into more basic things (or decomposability into parts). For example, in calling ‘knows’ a factive mental state operator, he means (among other things) to say that it is ‘an unanalysable expression’ in the sense that it is ‘not synonymous with any complex expression whose meaning is composed of the meanings of its parts’ (p. 34)

Then again, he also makes some priority claims about knowledge itself (not the concept or the word), such as: ‘[k]nowing does not factorize’ (p. 33). He states that he aims to find an approach to epistemology on which knowledge is ‘central, and not subordinate to belief’ (p. 5). And the thesis of his chapter 1 is explicitly that ‘[k]nowing is a state of mind’ (p. 21).

Other of Williamson's relevant-looking claims are less easy to categorize as falling neatly into one of the above camps, as (for example) when he says that one can 'characterize' knowledge 'without reference' to belief and 'characterize' belief 'by reference' to knowledge (p. 5).

There is of course no contradiction in holding various 'knowledge first' theses; it may be that Williamson shifts between the various claims mentioned above for the straightforward reason that he is interested in defending all of them. Nevertheless, it is philosophically worthwhile to articulate and consider the views independently. Our aim in this paper is to do some work to untangle the various different notions of *basicness* or *priority* that could be in play, both in the traditional project(s) and, correspondingly, in the knowledge first movement. All forms of knowledge first epistemology are still new and controversial, and our project is not to defend or reject it in any of its versions, although we will indicate and motivate some of our sympathies along the way. We think that convincing defences or rejections of knowledge first theses will only be possible in the light of clarification as to what is at stake in these debates.

## §2. *A Taxonomy of Priority*

As we see it, there are two families of notions of priority, which correspond to two families of versions of the traditional project, and hence to two kinds of 'knowledge first' views. We call them *metaphysical* and *representational* families of priority.

We begin with the metaphysical families. As alluded to above, one sense in which one might think that, for example, belief is more basic than knowledge, is that knowledge facts *obtain partly in virtue of* belief facts, rather than vice versa. Several metaphysicians have argued in recent decades that there is a hierarchical structure to reality;<sup>10</sup> such views are able to provide a sense of priority that can give content to the questions surrounding knowledge first epistemology. For example, according to one metaphysical interpretation of the traditional project, epistemologists were attempting to account for the nature of knowledge by identifying metaphysically prior states (belief, justification, etc.) which *ground* states of knowledge.

By contrast, *representational* families of priority locate the priority in question not in the metaphysics of knowledge itself, but in features of the way we think or talk about knowledge. For example, questions about whether one concept has another as a constituent are questions about priority in a representational sense.

We are not sure how best to make sense of talk of whether 'belief is conceptually prior to knowledge,' which seems to straddle the families. Such language appears to use, rather than mention, the terms 'belief' and 'knowledge', which is suggestive of the metaphysical family. But if 'conceptual priority' has to do with concepts, the use of this

---

<sup>10</sup> Prominent examples include Fine 2012, Koslicki 2012, and Sider 2011.

phrase suggests representational interpretations. We regard such statements as calling out for further interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

The metaphysical and representational families of priority claims are very different from one another, in at least two important kinds of ways. First, they have different subject matters: metaphysical priority claims consider how *knowledge itself* is related to states like *belief*, etc.; representational priority claims relate *ways of thinking or talking* about knowledge to ways of thinking or talking about other states. Second, methodologically speaking they are answerable to significantly different kinds of considerations. The truth or falsity of metaphysical priority claims is a matter of how the world is, rather than how we represent it. By contrast, representational priority claims are deeply tied up with human cognition; they are answerable to psychology in a way that metaphysical priority claims are not.<sup>12</sup> We will consider in §§3–4 what relations there might be between the two families. First, however, it is helpful to make further *intra-family* distinctions, to help clarify the kinds of views that are on offer. We begin with the metaphysical family.

### §2.1. Metaphysical Priority

One way to hold a metaphysical version of the knowledge first thesis is to consider knowledge to be a fundamental part of reality. Ted Sider (see e.g. Sider 2011) is a clear exemplar of a metaphysician discussing this sense of fundamentality (though not with respect to knowledge). According to Sider, there is, as an objective matter of fact, a *structure* to reality: some properties<sup>13</sup> are more fundamental than others, and they are the ones that carve nature at its joints. Here is one knowledge-first thesis: knowledge is such a property.

This kind of claim can come in a stronger or a weaker form. The strong form, suggested by a flat-footed reading of the claim that knowledge is *first*, would have it that knowledge is *absolutely* fundamental; it is among the *most basic* features of reality. This claim is

---

<sup>11</sup> Here is one interpretation of the language that might make good sense of some uses: it is a metaphysical claim, as the use of ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’ suggests, but it maintains that the metaphysical priority claim itself is a conceptual truth. The notion of conceptual truth needn’t be understood as a truth about concepts; it may rather be a matter of (e.g.) what Paul Boghossian calls *epistemic analyticity*: a sentence’s being such that ‘grasp of its meaning can suffice for justified belief in the truth of the proposition it expresses’ (Boghossian 2003). Whatever the merits of this notion, however, it does not seem a good candidate for making sense of *Williamson’s* discussion: Williamson holds that there are no conceptual truths in the sense of Boghossian’s epistemic analyticities (see Williamson 2006). Something more like Jenkins’s notion of conceptual truth, i.e. truth knowable through conceptual examination (see Jenkins 2008), may point to a more viable interpretation of Williamson, as it is unaffected by the arguments of Williamson 2006.

<sup>12</sup> The particular cases of priority claims about knowledge are somewhat complicated by the fact that knowledge itself is tied up with psychology; one of the metaphysical views in the neighbourhood, for example, is that knowledge (itself) is a mental state. So certain ways one might precisify the distinction in play are unavailable—we can’t say, for instance, that the difference lies in whether any priority is mind-dependent.

<sup>13</sup> Sider also discusses the fundamentality of things belonging to other ontological categories, but we shall restrict our attention to properties here.



very strong, and we see little to commend it. It entails, for example, that there can be no metaphysical reduction of the mental in terms of physical particles.<sup>14</sup> While this might be true, it seems odd to think of it as a commitment of knowledge first epistemology.

The more moderate version of the metaphysical priority claim would treat knowledge as *relatively* fundamental; it would say that, although some properties—those at play in physics, perhaps—are more fundamental than knowledge, knowledge is more fundamental than other epistemic properties like belief and justification.

Here, then, are two metaphysical priority claims one might be interested in considering:

- M-1. Knowledge is an absolutely fundamental feature of reality.
- M-2. Knowledge is a relatively fundamental feature of reality.

On some ways of understanding what metaphysical priority amounts to (including Sider's), it is closely related to *naturalness* in approximately David Lewis's (1983, 1984) sense. So some ways of spelling out (M-1) and (M-2) would have them assert respectively that knowledge is a *perfectly natural* or a *relatively natural* property.

A quite different notion of metaphysical priority, however, can be understood in terms of *parthood*: on this conception, parts are metaphysically prior to wholes. One reading of the traditional project is that knowledge has belief, etc. as constituents; in the same way that legs are parts of tables, belief and justification were thought to be parts of knowledge. So we can articulate a version of the knowledge first thesis that denies that knowledge has such parts:

- M-3. Knowledge does not have belief, etc. as proper parts.

We pause to make two quick observations here. First, there is also a stronger knowledge first thesis available in terms of parthood—namely, that states like belief in fact have *knowledge* as a proper part. This, however, does not seem plausible, since belief does not entail knowledge, but the existence of wholes does entail that of parts. So we focus attention here only on (M-3), which is in effect more a denial of a 'knowledge last' claim than anything stronger.

Second, parthood-priority and fundamentality-priority *might* be connected, but it is not obvious that they are. Since fundamentality theorists have tended to treat *small* things (like physical particles) as fundamental, the two notions of priority may coincide, but we see no reason one must say this. (Northeast England is part of England, but it is not obvious that it comes closer to marking a joint in nature. For an extreme way of denying that parthood entails fundamentality, consider the *priority monism* of Schaffer 2010.)

---

<sup>14</sup> This claim depends on the relatively uncontroversial assumption that knowledge is a state that is at least partly mental, but does not require commitment to the more controversial assumption that knowledge is a wholly mental state.

This question bears some relation to the question of whether knowledge is a mental state.

M-4. Knowledge is a mental state.

At least on its face, (M-4) is not any kind of priority claim, but there may be some connections with priority. Williamson argues for (M-4), contrasting his view with one according to which knowledge is a *hybrid* state, consisting in a combination of mental and non-mental conditions. On the assumption that *if knowledge is not a mental state then it is such a hybrid state*, denying (M-4) would require denying (M-3).

Another strand in the debate that appears to be related to metaphysical priority is the idea that knowledge is causally efficacious, and in particular that it figures into the best causal explanations of significant amounts of behaviour.

M-5. Knowledge plays important causal roles.

As before, although this is not itself a priority claim, comparison with the natural contrast case indicates why it would be associated with one. In many cases in which one both knows and acts, there is a dispute about whether it is one's *knowledge* that explains the action or one's mere *belief*.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as there is a sense in which relative fundamentality is associated with figuring as explanans rather than explanandum,<sup>16</sup> the claim that knowledge does the work is tantamount to a kind of priority claim of knowledge over belief (at least in these instances).

## §2.2. Representational Priority

We turn now to distinguishing a few different senses of representational priority. To say that there is a representational priority—for instance, of belief over knowledge—is not to make a claim about the world itself. Rather, it is to make a claim about the way we think about or talk about the world. For example, according to one interpretation of ‘conceptual analysis’, the aim of the post-Gettier literature was literally to analyse the concept KNOWS—i.e., to identify its component parts. Just as to analyse a chemical compound is to discover which more fundamental elements it is made up of, so might one treat conceptual analysis as the attempt to discover, of a given concept, which more fundamental concepts comprise it. One may read Gettier, then, as having refuted the view that the concept KNOWS is identical with the compound concept JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF. One kind of statement of a ‘knowledge first’ thesis in this neighbourhood would deny that KNOWS has conceptual constituents of the traditionally envisaged kind. For instance:

R-1. The concept KNOWS does not have BELIEVES as a part.

---

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Williamson 2000, pp. 62–63, Nagel 2013, pp. 282–283.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Jenkins 2013, especially section 3 (which surveys some of the connections between explanation and fundamentality in the extant literature on fundamentality).

A stronger claim might also be made: instead of merely denying the traditional analysis project, one might reverse it, suggesting that a concept like BELIEVES is in fact a complex concept that includes KNOWS as a constituent. Unlike its metaphysical analogue, this does not strike us as *clearly* implausible—it would imply the interesting thesis that thinking about belief requires thinking about knowledge; it would not imply the obviously false thesis that belief entails knowledge.

R-2. BELIEVES has KNOWS as a part.

Another kind of stronger conceptual claim is this, more general, one:

R-3. KNOWS does not have *any* other concept as a part.

As with our list of metaphysical theses, these are meant to be representative, not exhaustive. (For example, one can also generate statements of representational knowledge first claims involving concepts like JUSTIFICATION instead of BELIEF, in the obvious ways.)

Jennifer Nagel articulates one of the questions at issue in the knowledge first debate as (R-1), describing evidence she takes to bear on ‘whether the concept of knowledge is in some sense prior to the concept of belief, or whether it is composed from that concept and further conditions.’<sup>17</sup> It is clear that (R-1) is among the claims Williamson is interested in defending.<sup>18</sup> We are unaware of any serious defence of (R-2), although one could interpret certain remarks Williamson and other knowledge-first theorists have made along these lines.<sup>19</sup>

Note that one could hold (R-3) on extremely general grounds. Fodor (1998), for example, argues that lexical concepts (approximately, concepts corresponding to single words in natural languages) *quite generally* fail to decompose. All lexical concepts, Fodor argues, are atomic. Since KNOWS is a lexical concept, it has no conceptual constituents, so (R-3) is true. (Though note that Fodor’s view applies equally *against* (R-2).) Fodor’s famous claims here are highly relevant for the truth of any kind of representational priority claim in this neighbourhood, yet the knowledge first literature has not much engaged Fodor.<sup>20</sup> It seems to us that either this has been a mistake, or representational priority claims like (R-1), (R-2) and (R-3) aren’t ultimately where the action is in the knowledge first debate.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Nagel 2013, p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Williamson 2000, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Williamson 2000, p. 3: ‘Perhaps the inference from knowledge to belief derives from a conceptualization of belief in terms of knowledge...’,

<sup>20</sup> Williamson 2000, p. 31, fn. 4 briefly mentions Fodor as relevant.

<sup>21</sup> Quassim Cassim (2008, p. 19–20) complains that Williamson attacks a straw man in defending (R-1): ‘We have so far found no clear evidence either that analytic epistemologists who rely on conceptual

A different kind of representational priority claim concerns whether knowledge attributions involve other kinds of epistemic judgments, or vice versa. Jennifer Nagel articulates what a traditional (i.e. knowledge last) view of this kind would look like:

...in attributing knowledge of a proposition to some target agent, we attribute the mental state of belief, while simultaneously judging the agent's situation to satisfy various non-mental conditions. (Nagel 2013, p. 282)

Nagel rejects this traditional view,<sup>22</sup> writing that 'in attributing [knowledge] to others we would not ordinarily have to pass through intermediate stages of attributing the weaker mental state of belief...' (p. 284).

Here, then, is another pair of knowledge first theses:

- R-4. Knowledge ascriptions do not proceed by way of tacit belief ascriptions.
- R-5. Belief ascriptions are parasitic on our capacity for knowledge ascriptions.

In support of both claims, Nagel cites evidence from developmental psychology and non-human primate studies that suggests that belief attributions are in various ways more cognitively difficult than knowledge attributions.

These claims fit somewhat naturally with this one, which Nagel also defends:

- R-6. Children learn the concept KNOWS before the concept BELIEVES.

There are many other representational knowledge-first theses that we could mention, but these should suffice for now. Some intra-family connections seem plausible here; we can see a common-sense empirical case for expecting (R-6) to go along with (R-4) and (R-5)—and it looks like (R-2) at least will require (R-6).

But what of inter-family connections? Are there logical or evidential connections to be drawn between metaphysical and representational priority views? We turn now to this question.

### §3. *Connections Between Families?*

Knowledge first theses tend to be held or denied together. As we have been emphasising, for instance, Williamson is clearly interested in defending views from both families in

---

analysis to establish necessary and sufficient conditions for propositional knowledge actually think that concepts like knows and has a justified true belief are identical or that they are committed to thinking this. Why, then, does Williamson make so much of the issue of concept identity...?'

<sup>22</sup> One can find something like a statement of this traditional view in this passage from Jay Rosenberg (2002, p. xxx): 'We correctly judge that S knows that p whenever, from our de facto epistemic perspective, we judge S able adequately to justify his belief that p.'

*Knowledge and Its Limits*. But how natural a unity do they form? Is there any reason one should assume that metaphysical knowledge first theses should stand or fall together with representational ones? As we will explain below, we're not sure. We're open to the idea that there might be reasons to accept views from both families or neither; later in this section we'll point to some possible ways we can see arguments to this effect being attempted. We are rather confident, however, that there is no *obvious* connection between metaphysical and representational knowledge first theses. And this does seem to put us with odds with at least some epistemologists who assume such connections in their engagements with knowledge first epistemology.

Consider, for example, the fuller context of a passage from Jennifer Nagel quoted above:

Knowledge, in [Williamson's] view, is a stronger mental state than belief, but it is nevertheless a purely mental state in its own right, *so* in attributing it to others we would not ordinarily have to pass through intermediate stages of attributing the weaker mental state of belief and also recognizing the believed proposition as true. (Nagel 2013, p. 184, our emphasis)

Nagel's use of 'so' links a statement of our (M-4) to one of our (R-4). She does not remark on the inference, apparently considering it obvious. But we see no obvious justification for it. As we suggested above, we're reasonably comfortable with the move from (M-4)—knowledge is a mental state—to (M-3)—knowledge does not have belief as a component. But we don't see any reason to assume that the latter metaphysical claim should justify any claim in particular about how knowledge attributions made by humans work. We see no contradiction in the idea that knowledge does not have belief as a component, but that nevertheless, we only detect its presence by means of a step involving recognition of belief. After all, we only detect the presence of the measles virus by means of a step involving symptoms or antibodies, but that doesn't mean those symptoms or antibodies are *components* of the virus. Maybe there is something more specifically untenable about the combination of (M-4) and the denial of (R-4), but Nagel doesn't tell us what it is.

Elizabeth Fricker also assumes a connection between metaphysical and conceptual knowledge first theses. Fricker writes:

Williamson maintains that 'knows' has no analysis 'of the standard kind'—this being one that factors knowing into a conjunction of mental and non-mental components, notably the mental state of (rational) belief plus truth and some other factors. Call this thesis NASK. If NASK were false, 'know' having an a priori necessary and sufficient condition in terms of belief plus some other (non-factive) mental and non-mental components, this would establish the falsity of KMS ['knowledge is a mental state']: knowing would be revealed a priori to be a conjunctive 'metaphysically hybrid' state. (Fricker 2009, p. 33)

And she adds in a footnote:

Here I follow Williamson in ruling out the possibility of an error theory—that our concept ‘knows’ could be complex, while it in fact denotes a simple state. It is doubtful whether this is even coherent, and it can surely be discounted.

Fricker here seems to be arguing that denying (R-1) requires denying (M-3); she calls a view according to which KNOWS has BELIEVES as a component, but where knowledge does not have belief as a part but merely entails it, an ‘error theory’ of dubious coherence. But why? It is not true in general that features of concepts must be shared by the properties to which they refer. (The concept PINK SHIRT has no colour.) Why, then, is Fricker so convinced that KNOWS could not be a complex concept while denoting a simple state? A complex concept like CARRIE’S FAVOURITE PROPERTY can denote a simple property, after all: Carrie’s favourite property might be identity, or electronhood (or any property that the reader thinks is simple). Conversely, simple concepts can apparently denote complex referents: a concept like ... IS WATER can denote the complex property of being H<sub>2</sub>O. If there is some particular reason why KNOWS could not work like that, we are owed an argument.

We do think it is possible to identify *one* particular kind of combination of claims, in the vicinity of those Fricker discusses, that one can’t coherently make. However, this only works if one takes concept-identity talk to be literally a claim of *numerical identity*. Here is a toy model illustrating the kind of thing we mean. Suppose for the sake of argument that there are no Gettier cases—that there is no possible case of justified true belief without knowledge. Suppose also that the concept KNOWS is in fact identical to the complex concept JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF. One cannot coherently say:

1. The concept KNOWS is identical to the complex concept JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF.
2. Knowledge is not identical to justified true belief.

The problem with that particular combination is that, on the assumption that the concept identity in claim 1 is in fact true, the thought expressed by claim 2 is the *same thought* as:

3. Knowledge is not identical to knowledge.

And 3 is, of course, false.

But the fact that one can’t coherently accept 1 and 2 is an almost trivial, and quite specific, consequence about what a concept *identity* claim would commit one to. Significantly, this does not earn us a right to say anything more general about whether complex concepts can denote simple states. The only way we can make a move like the one from 2 to 3 is to assume, not just that KNOWS is a *complex* concept, but that it is literally identical with some *particular* complex of other concepts.

Another statement of a possible connection between the conceptual and the metaphysical readings of knowledge first comes from Johannes Roessler:

Mentalism is a claim about the state of knowing, not about the concept of knowledge. You might wonder, therefore, whether as a *metaphysical* thesis, it may not simply be neutral on *conceptual* issues. This would be a mistake, though.

Mentalism arguably does commit one to the *rejection* of the traditional priority view. Crudely put, the idea is this. Suppose *believes* is analytically prior to *knows*. This would imply that there is a successful reductive analysis of *knows* in terms of the more basic concepts *believes*, *is true*, and so on. These more basic concepts would, in turn, enable us to identify the circumstances whose obtaining would be sufficient for the state of knowing. So knowledge would turn out to be a ‘composite’ state, involving among other things, the mental element of believing that p and the (typically) non-mental element of p being true. If this were so, believing that p would be a kind of mental state that’s necessary for knowing that p, but there would be no kind of mental state that is necessary and *sufficient* for knowing that p. So knowing would not be a mental state. (Roessler 2013, pp. 322–323)

It seems that Roessler is here proposing that (M-4), via something like (M-3), entails something like (R-1). It seems to us, however, that the reasoning offered is suspect. At one point this inferential move is made:

- a. There is a successful reductive analysis of *knows* in terms of more basic concepts, which enable us to identify the circumstances whose obtaining would be sufficient for the state of knowing.
- b. So knowledge is a ‘composite’ state, involving among other things, the element of believing that p and the element of p being true.

But merely identifying sufficient circumstances for a state to obtain via a conceptual analysis does not, we contend, by itself tell us much about what the state in question is like. In particular, it does not by itself tell us whether the state is composite (let alone *of what* it is composed). To demonstrate this, note that a conceptual analysis of CARRIE’S FAVOURITE PROPERTY might enable us to identify sufficient conditions for being Carrie’s favourite property: it is sufficient that something be (i) a property, and (ii) favoured by Carrie above all other properties. But that property itself may be as simple and non-composite as the reader cares to imagine.

So we do not agree with Nagel, Fricker, and Roessler that one can *straightforwardly* infer metaphysical priority claims from representational ones, or vice versa. We do not rule out the idea that there may be connections, but as far as we can tell, no interesting connections have so far been established. This represents a limited point of agreement with a line famously advanced by Hilary Kornblith (2007); we close this section with a brief consideration of this connection.

Kornblith’s discussion of knowledge is not tied directly to knowledge first epistemology, but he is one of the authors who has written most explicitly about the relationship between metaphysical and representational projects in epistemology. He holds the rather strong view that epistemologists should not be take any interest in the *concept* KNOWS, but should just investigate the state of knowledge. The proper concern of epistemology, Kornblith writes, is knowledge *itself*. And the concept KNOWS isn’t even interesting as a *guide* to the state, according to Kornblith. Among the reasons he offers for this line is that the concept KNOWS refers to a natural kind, and natural kinds, he thinks, are just not the sorts of things about whose natures we can learn anything substantive about through

conceptual investigation. (He thinks that empirical enquiry is the appropriate methodology.) For those not already convinced that knowledge is a natural kind and that concepts provide us with no way to learn anything substantive about natural kinds, he adds:

It really doesn't matter, for present purposes, whether knowledge and other targets of philosophical analysis are natural kinds. ... [E]ven if the topics of philosophical interest typically correspond to ... socially constructed kinds, it remains true that the concepts of the folk, and the concepts of philosophers as well, need not accurately characterize these socially constructed categories. ... And once we recognize that our concepts, whether the concepts at issue are those of the folk or of theoreticians, may fail to characterize the categories they are concepts of, the philosophical interest of our concepts thereby wanes. (2007, pp. 36–37)

In this passage, Kornblith argues that because concepts can *mislead* us as to the true nature of what they represent, we cannot even use the concept KNOWS as a *guide* to the state of knowledge. The conclusion is that epistemologists should simply forget about studying the concept KNOWS altogether:

[O]ur concepts are not plausibly viewed as the target of philosophical understanding ... it is the extra-mental phenomena themselves which are the real targets of philosophical analysis: knowledge, justification, the good, the right, and so on, not anyone's concepts of these things. (p. 46).

Kornblith is in agreement with us, then, that there is no straightforward route from representational claims to metaphysical ones. However, we see two central points where Kornblith's approach diverges from ours. First, we do not assume that it is metaphysical, rather than representational, questions that are central to epistemology. There is a clear tradition of epistemological investigation of the nature of the concept KNOWS, the semantics of 'knows', and the psychology of knowledge ascriptions. We are pluralists about epistemology; we see no obvious reason not to think these are of significant epistemological interest in their own right, alongside questions about knowledge itself. Second, where we said only that we see no obvious connection between representational and metaphysical claims, Kornblith takes himself to argue that there couldn't be any. We do not accept Kornblith's argument.

As one of us has pointed out elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> Kornblith's argument from the possibility of mischaracterization is not compelling, because the mere possibility of error is not in general a good reason for scepticism. That is to say, the mere *possibility* that KNOWS may fail to reveal the true nature of knowledge does not show that it *doesn't* do so. Perhaps some version of Kornblith's conclusion can be derived with the aid of additional premises to the effect that (1) knowledge is a natural kind and (2) nothing substantive can be learned about natural kinds by examining concepts. But those are strong and controversial premises.

---

<sup>23</sup> Jenkins 2014.



None of this shows that Kornblith's position is wrong; perhaps the concept KNOWS tells us nothing of substance about knowledge. But if so, some argument for that claim is needed.

#### §4. *The Way Forward*

We conclude with some brief suggestions about how one might investigate the various knowledge first claims we've been articulating. What considerations might one look to in favour of or against each view?

We begin with (M-2), the thesis that knowledge is relatively metaphysically fundamental, and with a kind of consideration similar in spirit to certain arguments made by Williamson (2000, pp. 62–63). Suppose appeals to knowledge appear in a lot of the best explanations we can give of human action, and that we cannot explain the same actions comparably well by mentioning only belief (or true belief, or justified true belief, etc.). If knowledge has some such important role to play in our theorizing about observed phenomena, this may provide some support for (M-2), at least in the presence of further assumptions about the connections between fundamentality and theoretical roles. If, for example, we agree with Lewis (1984) that the perfectly natural (or fundamental) properties are the ones that appear in the basic axioms of a minimally adequate theory of the world, we might also take it more generally that figuring in *somewhat* simple yet *rather* informative theories evinces *relative* naturalness or fundamentality.

The same sort of claims could be supported if instead of (or as well as) appearing in good explanations of action, knowledge turned out to play multiple important roles in our other theorising. Still within the realm of human action, we might think here of the knowledge-action norms defended by (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, Fantl and McGrath 2009). More broadly, we might think of the idea that knowledge is a constitutive norm of assertion (Williamson 2000, pp. 238–269), the Williamsonian proposal that the best way to understand *evidence* is simply to identify it with knowledge (Williamson 2000, pp. 184–208), and the idea (hinted at by Williamson and developed in Bird (2007) and Ichikawa (2014) that, in a total reversal of the aims of the traditional project, justification might be analysed in terms of knowledge.

Turning to the other core metaphysical claims, as we mentioned in §2.1 above, we do not imagine there is much support for (M-1), the view that knowledge is *absolutely* metaphysically fundamental. But we of course invite metaphysicians of knowledge to prove us wrong about the plausibility and interest of this strong thesis. (M-3), the claim that knowledge does not have belief, etc. as proper parts strikes us as more likely to be defended by actual philosophers than (M-1). However, any serious defence of (M-3) has its work cut out; it will need to include at minimum a robust metaphysics of knowledge (are we talking about a property or relation? a kind of state? or what?) and then adduce some appropriate and compelling notion of *parthood* for things of that kind (do properties literally have parts?), before finding specific reason to discount the obtaining of a parthood relation between knowledge and (say) belief.

Another possible strategy for those interested in defending (M-2) or (M-3), or both, would be to argue for a corresponding claim about concepts or other representations (to which we will turn to in a moment) and then *further* argue that we should expect our concepts and the world to line up in the relevant respects (contra e.g. Kornblith 2007; see §3 above). We do not at the moment have any suggestions about how to argue for the necessary linkages, however.

On the representational side, if one buys Fodor's view about the atomic nature of lexical concepts, one gets (R-1)–(R-3), which are all about the rejection of conceptual parthood relations, for free. Independently of Fodorian premises, however, considerations in favour of specific theses from this group might be based upon conceptual analysis if one believes in such a thing: for example, if one thinks it is possible to tell by conceptual analysis, or through the use of intuition or what have you, that the concept KNOWS does not have concept BELIEVES as a part (R-1), one has support of a kind for (R-1) whether or not one is a Fodorian about concepts in general.

Yet another route to these theses about conceptual parthood might proceed via some of the other representational knowledge first thesis about (say) the order of conceptual acquisition: for example, if we established (R-6), that children learn the concept KNOWS before the concept BELIEVES, we might argue that this at least suggests (and maybe even entails) that (R-1) is true, i.e. that the concept KNOWS does not have concept BELIEVES as a part. Similarly, (R-4), the claim that belief ascriptions are parasitic on our capacity for knowledge ascriptions, might be thought of as at least suggestive of the truth of (R-1).

As for such psychological questions as whether children learn the concept KNOWS before the concept BELIEVES or vice versa, it seems to us pretty clear that the role of armchair epistemological theorising is extremely limited. These are claims that are properly in the domain of empirical psychology; armchair philosophical reflection should be informed by, but cannot replace, such enquiry.<sup>24</sup>

## References

- Bird, Alexander (2007). Justified Judging. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (1):81-110.
- Boghossian, Paul (2003). Epistemic Analyticity: A Defense. In Hans-Johann Glock, Kathrin Glür & Geert Keil (eds.), *Grazer Philosophische Studien: Fifty Years of Quine's Two Dogmas*. 15-35.

---

<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Dustin Locke, John Gregg, and Lisa Miracchi for detailed comments on a draft of this paper. An ancestral of this paper was presented at the 'Gettier Problem at 50' conference in Edinburgh in 2013; thanks to Jennifer Nagel, Timothy Williamson, and all the other participants there for helpful feedback. Thanks also to audiences at University of Waterloo and University of California, Davis, where a version of this paper was also presented.

- Cassam, Quassim (2009). Can the Concept of Knowledge be Analysed? In Patrick Greenough, Duncan Pritchard & Timothy Williamson (eds.), *Williamson on Knowledge*. Oxford University Press. 13-30.
- Clark, Michael (1963). Knowledge and Grounds: A Comment on Mr. Gettier's Paper. *Analysis* 24 (2):46 - 48.
- Fantl, Jeremy & McGrath, Matthew (2009). *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit (2012). Guide to Ground. In Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.) *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 37-80.
- Fodor, Jerry A. (1998). *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*. Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, Elizabeth (2009). Is Knowing a State of Mind? The Case Against. In Duncan Pritchard & Patrick Greenough (eds.), *Williamson on Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 31-60.
- Gettier, Edmund (1963). Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? *Analysis* 23 (6):121-123.
- Goldman, Alvin I. (1967). A Causal Theory of Knowing. *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (12):357-372.
- ——— (1976). Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge. *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (November):771-791.
- ——— (2009). Williamson on Knowledge and Evidence. In Patrick Greenough, Duncan Pritchard & Timothy Williamson (eds.), *Williamson on Knowledge*. Oxford University Press. 73-91.
- Hawthorne, John & Stanley, Jason (2008). Knowledge and Action. *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (10):571-590.
- Ichikawa, Jonathan J. (2014). Justification is Potential Knowledge. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44 (2):184-206.
- Jenkins, C. S. I. (2008). *Grounding Concepts: An Empirical Basis for Arithmetical Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.
- ——— (2013). Explanation and Fundamentality. In Miguel Hoeltje, Benjamin Schnieder and Alexander Steinberg (eds.), *Varieties of Dependence (Basic Philosophical Concepts Series)*. Munich: Philosophia Verlag. 211-42.
- ——— (2014). 'Intuition', Intuition, Concepts and the A Priori. In Anthony Booth and Darrell Rowbottom (eds.) *Intuitions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 91-115.
- Kaplan, Mark (1985). It's not What you Know that Counts. *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (7): 350-63.
- Kornblith, Hilary (2007). Naturalism and Intuitions. *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 74 (1):27-49.
- Koslicki, K. (2012). Varieties of Ontological Dependence. In Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.) *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 186-213.
- ——— (2008). Knowledge Needs No Justification. In Quentin Smith (ed.), *Epistemology: New Essays*. Oxford University Press. 5-23.

- Lewis, David K. (1983). New Work For a Theory of Universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61:343–377.
- ——— (1984). Putnam’s Paradox. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62: 221–236.
- Nagel, Jennifer (2013). Knowledge as a Mental State. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 4:275-310.
- Ramsey, Frank P. (1931). *Foundations: Essays in Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics, and Economics*. Humanities Press.
- Roessler, Johannes (2013). Knowledge, Causal Explanation, and Teleology. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 4: 321–332.
- Rosenberg, Jay (2002). *Thinking about Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2010). Monism: The Priority of the Whole. *Philosophical Review* 119 (1):31-76.
- Shope, Robert K. (1983). *The Analysis of Knowing: A Decade of Research*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Sider, Theodore (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- ——— (2006). Conceptual Truth. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80:1-14.
- Zagzebski, Linda (1994). The Inescapability of Gettier Problems. *Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (174):65-73.