1. Introductory

According to Timothy Williamson, where 'E' stands for evidence and 'K' stands for knowledge, $E=K$. He argues for the following theses, which jointly imply $E=K$:

(1) All evidence is propositional.
(2) All propositional evidence is knowledge.
(3) All knowledge is evidence.

In this paper, I will argue that Williamson's views on knowledge and evidence generate an unacceptable conception of perceptual knowledge and justification. The most plausible way out of the difficulty ruins Williamson's case against skepticism.

2. What is evidence?

In order to better understand $E=K$ and the theses (2) and (3), it will be helpful to start with (1). According to Williamson, a bloody knife is not evidence. He agrees with the "familiar claim that only propositions can be reasons for belief", and he puts forward several considerations aimed at making plausible the view that "only propositions that one grasps can function as evidence". For example, in inference to the best explanation, one seeks to formulate hypotheses that provide good explanations for one's evidence. Explanations can be put in the form '---because...', and only declarative sentences, expressing propositions, can be grammatically
substituted in the blanks. This suggests that when an hypothesis explains one's evidence, both explanandum and explanans are propositions.

Williamson's strategy is to find roles played by evidence (inference to the best explanation, probabilistic confirmation, the ruling out of hypotheses) which apparently can only be filled by propositions. Of course, this strategy is consistent with the existence of other roles played by evidence which are non-propositional in character. We will return to this point later, in discussing non-propositional justifiers.

Suppose that S's belief that P is justified by his evidence e. Williamson holds that e must be a proposition in order to play that evidential role. Though Williamson does say that S must grasp the proposition e, he initially says nothing about whether S must, further, believe e. It would seem to be very plausible to hold that e can function as S's evidence for believing P only if S also believes e. If e is merely a proposition that S grasps but does not believe, and perhaps disbelieves, then why would e count as part of S's evidence? Williamson does eventually bring belief into the picture. It is "granted" by him that knowledge entails belief. (202) Since he maintains E=K, his overall position has the consequence, which he notes, that S believes e: e's evidential status for S entails that S knows e, and that in turn entails that S believes e.

3. E=K

Let us digress briefly and get a better feel for E=K. As we just noted, by E=K, if Φ is evidence for S then S knows Φ. Conversely, if S
comes to know Φ, then Φ becomes part of S's evidence. Φ can then be used to justify further beliefs for S; Φ can enable S to expand his body of knowledge. In defending E=K, Williamson maintains that a justified, true belief that fails to amount to knowledge cannot be part of S's evidence. This would support E→K. Williamson says,

If evidence required only justified belief, then a critical mass of evidence could set off a kind of chain reaction. Our known evidence justifies belief in various true hypotheses; they would count as evidence too, so this larger evidence set would justify belief in still more true hypotheses, which would in turn count as further evidence... . The result would be very different from our present conception of evidence. (201)

Under certain conditions, E=K can also engender a problematic evidential chain reaction. Suppose that S has evidence e for believing Z (=This is a zebra): the animal looks just like a zebra, it is in an ordinary-seeming zoo, and there is a sign that reads "Zebra" by its enclosure. Suppose that e enables S to know Z but does not enable him to know the entailed ~CD (=This is not a cleverly disguised mule). Given E=K, when S comes to know Z, Z becomes part of S's evidence. Call the expanded evidence e+. Z is the best evidence that S could have for ~CD, since Z entails ~CD. Now S knows ~CD on the basis of e+, even though his original evidence e did not enable him to know ~CD. This is more of an evidential spontaneous generation than an evidential chain reaction, but it is problematic all the same.
More generally, E=K licenses evidential spontaneous generation if it can happen that (a) one’s evidence enables one to know Φ but not Ψ, and (b) one’s evidence plus Φ enables one to know Ψ.

4. Skepticism

In order to try to understand Williamson's view of perceptual knowledge, it will be helpful to discuss some of his remarks on skepticism. Let us consider the good case (G), in which "things appear generally as they ordinarily do, and are that way", and the bad case (B), in which "things still appear generally as they ordinarily do, but are some other way". (165) In G, S correctly believes H (=S has hands). In B, S mistakenly believes H and so does not know H; suppose that in B, S is a brain in a vat. Indeed, in B, S mistakenly believes that he is in G, and he fails to know that he is not in G. Williamson says (in my favorite of his graceful sentences), "Part of the badness of the bad case is that one cannot know just how bad one's case is". (165)

The skeptic wants to show that regardless of whether S is in G or in B, S does not know H. Williamson thinks that all the skeptic needs in order to show this is to establish the Sameness of Evidence Lemma:

(SEL) S has exactly the same evidence in G and in B.

Williamson says,

The skeptic typically insists that one has exactly the same evidence in the two cases. Therefore, since one
believes...[H] with that evidence in the bad case, believing...[H] with the evidence one has in the good case is insufficient for the truth of...[H]. (169)

This is a rather unusual take on the skeptical dialectic. Many opponents of skepticism grant that S's evidence in G does not ensure the truth of H, in the sense that it is possible that S should have the same evidence as he has in G while in a situation in which H is false. Such opponents of skepticism subscribe to the principle

\[(\sim E)\text{ One's evidence for an ordinary external-world proposition } \Phi \text{ is such that it is possible that one should have exactly similar evidence in a situation in which } \Phi \text{ is false; thus, where the evidence in question is propositional, it fails to entail } \Phi.\]

Typically, \((\sim E)\) is supported by the claim that an ordinary knower's evidence could be duplicated in B, in which he is mistaken in his external-world beliefs. Thus, opponents of skepticism who subscribe to \((\sim E)\) accept SEL. So it seems doubtful that SEL is sufficient to generate a skeptical conclusion.

Even if SEL is not sufficient for the skeptic's purposes, it might well be necessary. One standard way of setting up the skeptical argument is as follows:

\[(A) \text{ If S knows } \text{H} (=S \text{ has hands}), \text{ then S knows } \sim \text{SK} (=S \text{ is not in B}).\]
(B) S does not know ~SK.

So (C) S does not know H.

(A) is supported by a closure principle for knowledge, such as

(CL) If S knows that \( \Phi \) and S knows that \( \Phi \) entails \( \Psi \), then S knows that \( \Psi \).

(B) can be supported in the following way. First, this Underdetermination Principle is put forward:

(UP) If S's evidence for \( \Phi \) does not favor \( \Phi \) over a competing incompatible hypothesis \( \Psi \), then S is not justified in believing \( \Phi \).

Suppose that the skeptic can establish

(*) S's evidence does not favor ~SK over SK.

(UP) and (*) imply that S is not justified in believing ~SK. Given that knowledge requires justification, (B) would thereby be established.

But what is the skeptic's justification for (*)? This is where something like SEL seems to be required. If S has the same evidence regardless of whether he is in B or instead in G, then his evidence (regardless of whether he in fact holds it in G or in B) does not favor ~SK over SK.
Williamson thinks that SEL is false, and he criticizes what he takes to be the skeptic's only argument for SEL. Working through Williamson's critique of that argument would take us too far afield. For present purposes, I would like to raise a question and then consider, in the next section, Williamson's likely answer. Why isn't it just obvious that SEL is true? Suppose that it is indeed possible for someone to be in B in virtue of being a brain in a vat. Then isn't it just part of the description of such a bad case that the brain has experiences indistinguishable from those of a normal subject of experience, together with beliefs and reasoning abilities that mirror those of an ordinary subject? If the vat thought experiment is so constructed, then, according to the current line of thought, SEL seems clearly correct: the envatted brain's evidence for H is just like that of someone in G. We will consider Williamson's like reply below.

5. Perceptual knowledge

Now we can pick up the main thread of the paper. Williamson discusses a pair of cases: S sees a mountain in normal circumstances and correctly believes that it is a certain shape, and S sees a mountain in unfavorable circumstances and is under the illusion that it is a certain shape (it is some other shape). What is S's evidence in each case? The evidence will consist of believed propositions, on Williamson's view. In this good case, S's evidence is the true proposition expressed by his utterance of 'It is that shape'. Williamson specifies this as the proposition that the mountain is that shape (call this M). But this proposition cannot be S's evidence in the pertinent bad case, since S mistakenly believes the proposition in the
bad case. The proposition is false in the bad case, hence not known by S in the bad case, and hence (in light of E=K) not a candidate for being S's evidence in the bad case. Williamson says,

If perceptual evidence in the case of illusions consists of true propositions, what are they? The obvious answer is: the proposition that things appear to be that way. (198)

Thus, S's evidence in the bad case, according to Williamson, is the proposition that the mountain appears to be that shape (call this M_a).

So the remarks at the end of the preceding section about the plausibility of SEL presuppose a mistaken conception of evidence, Williamson will say. In G, the normal subject's evidence consists of propositions like M, whereas in B, the envatted subject's evidence consists of evidence like M_a. SEL is false for this reason, Williamson will say.

Williamson's views about evidence and knowledge have problematic consequences regarding perceptual knowledge. To see this, let us consider my belief of the proposition that my cup is red (call this C). Let us suppose that this is an instance of perceptual knowledge. It is natural to ask whether, for Williamson, my visual experience of the red cup plays a role in my knowledge of C. Since experiences are not propositions, they cannot function as evidence for C, on Williamson's view. The most that Williamson is inclined to grant regarding the epistemic role of experience is that in some cases,

....the evidence for an hypothesis h consists of propositions e_1,...,e_n, which count as evidence for one only because one is undergoing a perceptual experience ε. (197)
Williamson does not explicitly endorse this view, saying only that it is "consistent with E=K". (197)

My belief of C, we are assuming, is an instance of knowledge. Let us suppose that my belief of C is justified on the basis of evidence, which, on Williamson's view, will consist of one or more believed propositions. Which? In the mountain example, S's evidence in the good case consists of the proposition that the mountain is that shape. Apparently, Williamson will maintain that in the present example, the proposition that my cup is red constitutes my evidence for my belief of C (supposing that that belief is indeed evidentially based). In order to function as my evidence, I must believe the evidential proposition in question. Further, Williamson may grant that that evidential proposition attains the status of evidence only because I am undergoing a visual experience of the red cup. So now we have arrived at the following position: my belief of C is justified in virtue of my belief of the evidential proposition that my cup is red. That is to say, my belief of the proposition that my cup is red is justified in virtue of my belief of the proposition that my cup is red!

This is an unacceptable view of the structure of perceptual knowledge and justification. Further, insofar as Williamson's rejection of SEL is based on this view (see the earlier discussion of S's evidence in the mountain example), his main answer to the skeptic is vitiated. That is, Williamson can no longer distinguish S's evidence in G from his evidence in B by holding that the former consists of true propositions about the external world while latter consists of true propositions about how things appear.
6. A possible move

Even though Williamson's remarks about the mountain example warrant the attribution of the unacceptable view to him, perhaps he can avoid it while maintaining key features of his overall position (such as E=K and the rejection of SEL). One move would be to give up the view that perceptual knowledge is evidentially based. He would balk at this, given the following remarks. He raises the question, "...is all justified belief justified by evidence?" (207) He answers as follows:

It is far from obvious that any belief is justified in the truth-directed sense [relevant to knowledge] without being justified by evidence. ...E=K supports the plausible equation of truth-directed justification with justification by evidence.¹⁰ (207-8)

However, suppose that Williamson accepts the suggested move: perceptual knowledge and justification are not evidentially based. Then the questions arise: What is the source of the justification of perceptual beliefs, and in virtue of what do such beliefs constitute knowledge? We saw earlier that Williamson is willing to countenance the view that in some cases, a proposition e constitutes evidence for an hypothesis only because the subject has some experience e. Perhaps Williamson could maintain that my experience of the red cup (i) is what justifies my belief of C, and thus (ii) enables that belief to amount to knowledge. However, this would be a case of justification and knowledge that does not involve reasons for belief, which, on Williamson's view, can only
be propositions. Further, Williamson explicitly rejects the proposed move:

The threatening alternative [to my view] is that [experience] ε can itself be evidence for h, without the mediation of any such [evidential propositions] e1,...,en. (197)

Even so, Williamson could maintain, as some have, that experiences have propositional content, in that they represent the world as being a certain way. So even though the justifier is not a proposition, it is nevertheless proposition-like.

This way of avoiding the unacceptable view of perceptual knowledge and justification that Williamson's overall position entails has a major drawback for him. S's experiences in G and in B have the same propositional content: in B, S mistakenly believes H (=S has hands) in virtue of his experience as of having hands. S's experience in B represents the world as containing a handed S, just as does his experience in G. On the suggested move, then, that which (allegedly) justifies S's belief of H in G is his (non-evidential) experience as of having hands. In B, S has the same experience as of having hands. G and B do not differ in respect of S's evidence for H, since S has none, on the suggested move. Further, the element which provides whatever justification S has for believing H in G is also present in B. Thus, Williamson's denial of SEL is blocked if he adopts the suggested move. G and B do not differ in respect of that which would serve to justify S's belief of H (if anything does in fact justify that belief). The skeptic can therefore appeal to variants of (UP) and (*) which treat of justifying elements rather than evidence and thereby show that S is not
justified in believing ~SK (and thus fails to know ~SK). So on the suggested move, Williamson's answer to the skeptic is unavailable to him.

7. Conclusion

There are two alternatives for Williamson. Either my perceptual knowledge that my cup is red (=C) is evidentially based, or it is not. On the first alternative, his overall position enables him to stymie the skeptic by denying SEL. But his overall position is unacceptable, as it implies that my belief of C is justified in virtue of my believing the evidential proposition C. On the second alternative, Williamson needs to hold that my belief of C is not justified by evidence but instead by experience. But on this alternative, he can no longer deny SEL, and then his case against the skeptic thus evaporates.

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ENDNOTES

1 See his Knowledge and its Limits (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 9. All page references in the text are to this book.


3 This is the view defended by Fred Dretske in "Epistemic Operators" (Journal of Philosophy, 1970). He holds that S can know Z without knowing ~CD because CD is not a relevant alternative to Z.

4 Peter Klein endorses this view of how ~CD becomes known in Certainty (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), and in "Skepticism and Epistemic Closure: Why the Evil Genius Argument Fails" (Philosophical Topics, 1995). See my "Skepticism and Epistemic Closure" (Philosophical Topics, 1985) and "Klein on Closure and Skepticism" (Philosophical Studies, 2000) for criticism of the view.

5 See my "The Structure of the Skeptical Argument" (Philosophy and Phenomenological Research (1994) ) for a discussion of this way of conceiving the skeptical argument.

6 See sections 8.4-8.6.

7 Let us consider a bad case in which the contents of the subject's thoughts are the same as in the good case. We suppose that the subject has lived for many years in a normal environment but has just recently been surreptitiously envatted. So we are not considering the specialized vat hypotheses described by Hilary Putnam in Reason, Truth and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), in which the brains in a vat never have any ordinary causal contact with trees, hands, and so on. In such a scenario, an externalist about intentional content may hold that the contents of the brain's thoughts differ from those of a normal thinker.

8 As we saw earlier, Williamson's E=K entails this, since one knows one's evidence and knowledge requires belief.

9 It is a curious feature of Williamson's conception of evidence that if e is part of S's evidence, then for S, e is evidence for itself. This is because Williamson holds that e is evidence for h for S if and only if S's evidence includes e, and the conditional probability of h given e is greater than the probability of h. The second requirement will be met if e's probability is less than 1, since Prob(e/e)=1. But this feature of Williamson's overall position does not take the sting out of the current difficulty. He says of this curious feature of his view:

   Certainly...[the feature] does not make it trivially easy to have evidence for e, for e is evidence for itself only if S's evidence includes e. By E=K, that requires S to know e, which may not be easy.

(187)

10 The second sentence is implausible: E=K is consistent with there being non-evidential justification. Wherever there is evidential justification, one may grant, the evidence is known; and wherever there is knowledge, it may function as evidence; but some justification that yields knowledge, one may hold, is non-evidential.

11 See, for example, James Pryor's "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist" (Nous 2000), and Michael Huemer's Skepticism and the Veil of Perception (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

12 Another alternative, which Williamson does not discuss, is to opt for a coherence theory on which the epistemic status of my belief of C depends on its being the member of a coherent system of beliefs. See, for example, Laurence BonJour's The Structure of Empirical Knowledge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

13 Thanks to Arash Naraghi for helpful discussion of these issues.