PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 7: The right approach?

1. The accounts of knowledge that we have been looking at (JTB, Goldman, Lehrer and Paxson, Dretske, Nozick) all take it that knowledge can be accounted for along the following lines:

   S knows that P iff
   - It is true that P
   - S believes that P
   - X

   Let's abbreviate this to: Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X.

2. And they are right! The following account is *true*:

   S knows that P iff
   - It is true that P
   - S believes that P
   - If it is true that P and S believes that P then S knows that P

3. But this account is *circular* – the third condition appeals to the very thing which is to be accounted for: knowledge. The assumption of these authors is that a *non-circular* account can be given – that the third condition can be given without appealing to knowledge (either explicitly or implicitly).

4. Williamson calls into question whether or not this can be done.[1] He considers four arguments that it can be done, and argues against each. And he gives two arguments that it cannot be done.

5. First argument considered. If S knows that P then it *follows* that it is true that P, and it *follows* that S believes that P. Therefore, for some X, Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X.

   Williamson argues that this argument is not valid. Here is a counterexample: It is *true* that if O is red then it follows that O is coloured, but it is *false* that, for some X, Red = Coloured and X (at least if the account is to be non-circular).

6. Second argument considered. If S knows that P then it *follows* that it is true that P, and it *follows* that S believes that P. This can be *explained* on the assumption that, for some X, Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X.

   Williamson argues that this is not the *only* explanation. Here is another: For some X, Belief = Knowledge or X.

   It is helpful to compare: If *x* is red then it follows that *x* is coloured. One explanation of this is that, for some X, Red = Coloured and X. But here is another: For some X, Coloured = Red or X (perhaps Coloured = Red or Orange or Yellow or Green or Blue or Indigo or Violet).

[1] See Williamson, T. (2000), *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: OUP), pp. 2-5, 27-33, 41-48.

In the colour case, the second explanation seems the better one. Maybe in the knowledge case, too, the second explanation is the better one.

7. Third argument considered. We have a correct account of the form Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X, therefore it can be done.

   Williamson takes it that the premise here is false – we do not yet have a correct account.

8. Fourth argument considered. Even if we do not yet have a correct account, we have accounts that are very good approximations. So for some X, Knowledge ≈ Truth and Belief and X. This is good evidence that, for some X, Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X.

   Williamson argues that this is *not* good evidence. Try giving an account of being a parent in terms of being an ancestor. To a very good approximation, *x* is a parent of *y* iff *x* is an ancestor of *y*, and *x* is not an ancestor of an ancestor of *y*. The only counterexamples to this are when a parent has a child with a child. So, for some X, Parent ≈ Ancestor and X. But it is *false* that, for some X, Parent = Ancestor and X (at least if the account is to be non-circular). More plausibly, being an ancestor is to be accounted for in terms of being a parent: *x* is an ancestor of *y* iff there is a chain of parenthood running from *x* to *y* (or, iff *x* belongs to every class containing all parents of *y*, and all parents of its members).

9. First argument given. We have not yet found a correct account of the form Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X, therefore there is no correct account. (This is an inference to best explanation, rather than deductive inference.)

10. Second argument given. Suppose we eventually find an account of the form Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X, sufficiently complex that it suffers no counterexamples. Why would we care about knowledge, if *that's* what it is? (This is more of a *challenge* than an argument.)

11. Final consideration (mine, kind of). It is traditional to distinguish between knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and knowledge-how:

    a. I know Harry.
    b. I know that Harry is funny.
    c. I know how to make Harry laugh.

    But here is a reason to think that we mean the same thing by 'know' in each case:

    d. I know Harry and that he is funny.
    e. I know Harry and how to make him laugh.
    f. I know that Harry is funny and how to make him laugh.
    (compare: 'The chair and questions were hard')

    If we use 'know' with the same meaning in each case, then knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and knowledge-how are all instances of the same thing – *knowledge*. This poses a *challenge* to the idea that, for some X, Knowledge = Truth and Belief and X: how is this an account of what it is to know Harry, or of what it is to know how to make Harry laugh?