Intuitions and Philosophical Evidence

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Evidence in Philosophy

1. Psychologising Evidence

2. For Begging Questions

3. Science and Psychological Evidence

4. Learning from Hard Cases
Perceptual Evidence

When I look at a table in front of me, what kind of perceptual evidence do I get? Two answers spring to mind.

**Psychological** That I am visually representing that there is a table in front of me

**External** That there is a table in front of me
Perceptual Evidence

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- Explains why I know so easily how I know that there is a table in front of me
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- Staves off doubts about my evidence
- Explains why I know so easily how I know that there is a table in front of me
- Offers an easy theory of what it is to have evidence; if evidence consists of mental states, you have the evidence just in case you have the state
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But it also has a big disadvantage

- Suggests scepticism about the external world

The external answer avoids that
Philosophical Evidence

When I think about a philosophical example, say the Gettier case, what evidence do I get?

**Psychological**  That it seems intuitive that the Gettiered subject does not know

**External**  That the Gettiered subject does not know
Williamson defends the external answer. His positive picture consists of two claims

1. Philosophical evidence consists in facts about the external world, not facts about psychological states

2. To have $p$ as part of your evidence, it is necessary, and sufficient, that you know $p$

Saying something like (2) is necessary because the defender of an external conception of evidence owes us a theory about what it is to have evidence
What is it to Psychologise Evidence

We can get a better sense of what Williamson is opposed to by considering a testimony case. (The following is modelled on a case Frank Jackson talks about in his discussion of question-begging.) Imagine we’re in the following position:

- We know that if Celtic win today, they will be champions
- We don’t (yet) know whether Celtic won
- But our good friend Smith is at the game
- Smith is a trusted friend, and in the past he has been a reliable testifier
- We call Smith, and he says ”Celtic won”

We come to know that Celtic are champions, but how? Again, two arguments spring to mind.
Inferences from Testimony

An argument from facts about football

1. If Celtic won, they are champions
2. Celtic won
3. So, Celtic are champions
Inferences from Testimony

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An argument from facts about Smith’s report

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The first argument is valid, the second argument is not. But the premises of the second argument are more certain. So epistemically, the two arguments are on a par. And perhaps the second is to be preferred, because it is more explicit.
Speechifying Evidence

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- We might call this speechifying evidence, since we take the existence of the testimonial evidence to be what’s really doing the work.
- It isn’t uncontroversial in the testimony literature that this is a painless move.
- We can imagine a person whose model of testimonial evidence is external saying we should stick with 1.
- But that position seems unhappy, and we’ll ignore it.
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That is, in general we’ll take it that in a testimonial inference, the second presentation is no worse epistemically, and more explicit, than the first
What is it to Psychologise Evidence

So who is Williamson’s opponent when he complains about psychologising evidence?

- You might think it is someone who thinks we can always replace $p$ with *Intuitively, p* in philosophical arguments
- At least some of the time, such a replacement looks prima facie plausible
Two Gettier Arguments

An argument from facts about Gettier cases

1. If knowledge is justified true belief, then Gettiered subjects know
2. Gettiered subjects don’t know
3. So, knowledge isn’t justified true belief
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An argument from facts about Gettier intuitions

1. If knowledge is justified true belief, then Gettiered subjects know
2. Intuitively, Gettiered subjects don’t know
3. So, knowledge isn’t justified true belief

Perhaps philosophers make, or ought if they were being careful make, the second. That seems to be the position of Williamson’s opponent.
Two Singer Arguments

But that position is, in general, absurd, as the following two arguments (the first of which is loosely modelled on Singer’s *Animal Liberation*) show:

1. Eating meat is morally permissible only if it is necessary for a healthy diet
2. Eating meat is not necessary for a healthy diet
3. So, eating meat is not morally permissible

Compare the ‘psychologised’ version:

1. Eating meat is morally permissible only if it is necessary for a healthy diet
2. Intuitively, eating meat is not necessary for a healthy diet
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What is it to Psychologise Evidence

So (once again) who is Williamson’s opponent when he complains about psychologising evidence?

- Sometimes he writes as if it is the person who always wants to psychologise evidence; but we don’t need a fancy argument to show that they’re wrong
- Sometimes he writes as if it is the person who sometimes wants to psychologise evidence; but I don’t know what an argument against such a person would even look like
- We’ll take the opponent to be someone who thinks that typically, a large part of the evidence for a philosophical conclusion is psychological
Evidence in Philosophy

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Why Psychologise

Over the course of his chapter ”Evidence in Philosophy”, Williamson appears to defend two theses:

- That an apparently popular view about evidence, which he calls Evidence Neutrality, is false
- That without Evidence Neutrality, there is no reason to psychologise evidence

We’ll criticise both points today
Evidence Neutrality

Here is the quote that introduces Evidence Neutrality

”Although the complete elimination of accidental mistakes and confusions is virtually impossible, we might hope that whether a proposition constitutes evidence is in principle uncontentiously decidable, in the sense that a community of inquirers can always in principle achieve common knowledge as to whether any given proposition constitutes evidence for the inquiry”
Evidence Neutrality

The quote there seems to have a weaker and a stronger reading

- The weaker reading is that it is decidable, by consensus, which propositions are, in principle, evidentially relevant to an inquiry as to whether \( p \)

- The stronger reading is that that is true, and it is also decidable, by consensus, in which epistemic direction each piece of evidence points

I think if either reading supports psychologising evidence, the weaker reading does. So I’ll just focus on that here. Perhaps this is a misinterpretation of Williamson, who only intends to argue against the stronger reading.
Dialectical Conception of Evidence

Evidence Neutrality (EN) is a kind of dialectical conception of evidence (DCE)

- What our evidence is just is what our interlocutors will allow as evidence
- On the stronger reading, it is what our interlocutors will take to be evidence for our conclusions
- On the weaker reading, it is what they’ll allow as evidence, though they may say one particular piece of evidence, a piece we take to be crucial, is not very strong
Uncooperative Interlocutors

A key argument against EN, and against DCEs in general, is that they lead to disastrous results when we have overly sceptical interlocutors.
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"Some scepticism, like scepticism about reason, is so radical that it leaves too little unchallenged for what remains as shared evidence to be an appropriate basis for evaluating the claims under challenge."

The idea here traces back at least as far as David Lewis’s response to dialethism.
Lewis Against Dialethism

"The radical case for relevance [i.e. dialethism] should be dismissed just because the hypothesis it requires us to entertain is inconsistent. That may seem dogmatic. And it is: I am affirming the very thesis that Routley and Priest have called into question and - contrary to the rules of debate - I decline to defend it. Further, I concede that it is indefensible against their challenge. They have called so much into question that I have no foothold on undisputed ground. So much the worse for the demand that philosophers always must be ready to defend their theses under the rules of debate." (Logic for Equivocators)
Lewis Carroll

I think this response goes too quickly.

- EN and DCE are claims about **evidence**.
- They aren’t (at least in their weaker versions) claims about what we can do with evidence.
- We can see the difference by looking at a famous story by Lewis Carroll, from a paper in *Mind* in 1895
Achilles and the Tortoise

Achilles knows that $p$ and $p \rightarrow q$.

He wants to infer $q$.

The tortoise wants to know on what basis he makes this inference.

Achilles says that his premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion.

The tortoise agrees; he says that $(p \land (p \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow q$ is a premise Achilles should be entitled to.

So Achilles takes that as a premise, and goes to infer $q$.

The tortoise wants to know on what basis he makes this inference.

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The tortoise agrees; he says that $(p \land (p \rightarrow q)) \land ((p \land (p \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow q$ is a premise Achilles should be entitled to.

And so on...
Rules and Premises

One lesson we take from Lewis Carroll’s story is that there is a difference between rules of inference and premises:

- You can’t just make modus ponens an extra premise of the argument
- If you do, you’ll still need rules
But perhaps we get an even stronger conclusion by thinking of the case where we are doubting our own reasoning

- Imagine the tortoise is not an unhelpful interlocutor, but our own doubts
- We could try answering the doubts, and adopting the answers as extra premises
- But that won’t get us to the conclusion
- At some stage we need to leap from premises to conclusion, without necessarily an extra step
I’m inclined to draw a fairly strong conclusion from this:

- Rules of inference don’t need independent justification
- They are the thongs that justify, rather than the things that are justified
- Perhaps tacit premises need justification, but not genuine inferential rules
I’m inclined to draw a fairly strong conclusion from this:

- Rules of inference don’t need independent justification.
- They are the thongs that justify, rather than the things that are justified.
- Perhaps tacit premises need justification, but not genuine inferential rules.
- I’m indebted here to some things Crispin has been saying recently, though I’m not sure he’d put things quite so unsubtly!
Dialectical Conceptions

That suggests that we should treat the epistemic status of premises and rules differently

- Premises need justification
- Rules don’t

Pieces of evidence are more like premises than like rules of inference

- Evidence needs justification
- The motivation for the DCE comes from this
- Rules don’t need justification
- So we shouldn’t have a dialectical conception of rules
Responding to Dialethists

So although Lewis’s response to Priest and Routley is question-begging, it doesn’t violate DC\text{E}

- The evidence that dialethism is false is that (as is agreed on all sides) that if it is true, then a contradiction is true
- From that it follows that dialethism is false
- It might not be agreed on all sides that it follows, but agreement (or even justification) is not needed for primitive inferential moves
Responding to the Reasons Sceptic

This is harder, but I think we can do it if we think about induction

- I see a lot of Fs that are all Gs, and I see them in a lot of different places etc
- I conclude that I have good reason to believe the next F I see will be G
Responding to the Reasons Sceptic

This is harder, but I think we can do it if we think about induction

- I see a lot of Fs that are all Gs, and I see them in a lot of different places etc
- I conclude that I have good reason to believe the next F I see will be G
- This is a direct inference; there is no mediating premise
- If you don’t think so, try to imagine (a) what such a premise could be, and (b) how it could be justified

So my frequent observation of green emeralds is sufficient evidence to conclude that reasons scepticism is false
Summary

- If Evidence Neutrality stopped us responding to extreme sceptics, then it would be thereby refuted.
- But the sceptics that we most obviously have to respond to are generally denying good inferential rules, not denying the evidence we have.
- And Evidence Neutrality, at least on its weak reading, is silent about whether rules of inference need dialectical justification.
- The picture here obviously makes a lot of work rest on what a good rule of inference is.
- And, equally obviously, I don’t have much of a story to tell here.
- But it seems there must be a story (for Carrollian reasons) and that story will do.
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"If Evidence Neutrality psychologises evidence in philosophy, it psychologises evidence in the natural sciences too. But it is fanciful to regard evidence in the natural sciences as consisting of psychological facts rather than, for example, facts about the results of experiments and measurements. When scientists state their evidence in their publications, they state mainly non-psychological facts (unless they are psychologists); are they not best placed to know what their evidence is?" (212)
The argument here seems clear

1. If Evidence Neutrality psychologises evidence in philosophy, it psychologises evidence in science.
2. It’s bad to psychologise evidence in science
3. So, Evidence Neutrality is bad

I think both premises are false
Division of Labour

One characteristic feature of science is that the intellectual labour is divided

- Particular sciences are characterised by what they take for granted
- Often what they take for granted are principles of evidence
- So certain things are taken as given to be evidence in biology because, say, chemistry says they are
- That sounds consistent with evidence neutrality, if we’re careful about the quantifier domains
- What counts as evidence in biology is uncontentiously decidable among biologists
- That’s because, inter alia, in some cases to question the evidence is to stop doing biology, and start doing chemistry
Some Metrology Lessons

Look again at Williamson’s quote

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There’s a process/result ambiguity here

- Is the ’measurement’ reported the result of the measurement, or the existence of the measurement?
- My experience in science is that both are frequently reported
Some Metrology Lessons

In fact, let’s think a little longer about how measurement works in simple engineering projects

- Typically you’ll have all sorts of machines whose job it is to measure certain things
- Those machines are fallible
- But it isn’t the job of the machine operator to check whether they’re working (except in extreme cases)
- There’ll be someone else whose job it is to calibrate/service the machine
- And there’ll be someone else (perhaps an accreditation agency) whose job it is to check the people who calibrate machines
- And there’ll be other people (a board or something) that looks over what the accreditation agency is doing
Metrology and Psychology

Interestingly, at the highest (lowest?) level in this process, psychological questions come up all the time

- For instance, an accreditation agency (or their oversight board) might set policies on certain kinds of 'eyeball' measurements
- What those policies are will depend on beliefs about psychological (or at least visual) capacities

So in most settings, questions of evidence are uncontentious, i.e. settled, because debatable questions are referred up the line. Within any relevant community, there is a method for settling questions about evidence, generally by taking some external group to be referee. The only time this breaks down is when, at the end of the day, we do psychologise evidence.
The Structure of Science

The same kind of picture is true in pure science, as well as engineering

- Most sciences (except perhaps physics) presuppose results of more general science
- The result is that in any particular situation, participants to the debate can agree on what is taken for granted
- Frequently that means that in practice people agree on what counts as evidence
- It’s not that disagreement is impossible, it’s just that often disagreement requires moving to a different science
Psychologising Physics

The exception of course is physics, which builds on nothing

- At least the purest of pure physics doesn’t; most physics takes other fields of physics for granted
- But the purest of pure physics ends up psychologising evidence all the time
- It’s really not a coincidence that it’s in foundational physics for many years we didn’t just psychologise evidence, we (at least those of us who accepted the Copenhagen interpretation) psychologised the physical mechanisms
Psychologising Physics

- And even today, I hear a lot more worries about (what sound to me like) sceptical scenarios among philosophers of physics than epistemologists.

- This is especially true in statistical mechanics, where people worry about whether the best (statistical mechanical) explanation of the evidence we have, i.e. our psychological states, is the recent, i.e. in the last few seconds, creation of the world. (The worries here are about why the past is so low entropy, and the proposal is that it wasn’t; the spontaneous creation of all we see might be more likely, from a thermodynamic perspective, than the massively low entropy of the past.)
Working Without a Net

So sometimes, even in science, we psychologise evidence

- Typically we psychologise evidence when there's no other area of inquiry we can 'pass off' evidential questions to
- But that's typically the case in philosophy
So sometimes, even in science, we psychologise evidence

- Typically we psychologise evidence when there’s no other area of inquiry we can ’pass off’ evidential questions to
- But that’s typically the case in philosophy
- Not always; we can pass off questions about the nutritional value of vegetarian diets to nutritionists, for example
- But often enough that typically we have to fall back on psychological states as evidence
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Simple Illusion Argument

Consider a philosophical case where opinions vary

- Some people think some possible $x$ is $F$, others think it is $\neg F$
- And both parties build their philosophical theories on these intuitions
- It seems both parties are (potentially) being good philosophers
- So both parties are basing their beliefs on evidence
- So evidence must be psychological, because one of the parties doesn’t have non psychological facts to rely on
Simple Illusion Argument

That argument doesn’t go through for several reasons

- First, it is possible that someone can be a good reasoner without having any evidence
  - I think, for example, that brains in vats don’t have any evidence, but they can be good reasoners
  - That’s because they are rationally following their apparent evidence
- Second, perhaps psychological states are evidence, but facts are better evidence
  - That position isn’t entirely in keeping with what Williamson says, but it’s pretty close
- And since we think the philosophers who get things right are epistemically better off, it’s consistent with what we want to say about the simple case described on the previous slide
Dusk Eyesight

The argument just considered, and rejected, is like the argument that perceptual evidence must be psychological, for how else could we explain the justified belief of subjects suffering from unknown illusions

- I think we get a better case by thinking about agents who know their limitations, but aren’t actually under any illusions
- For instance, I’m terrible at judging distances at night, though I’m not bad at it in the day
- If I haven’t checked my eyesight at dusk, and I’m actually not bad at judging distances at dusk, what evidence do I get from (apparent) distances at dusk?
- It seems to me I get some evidence, better than I get in situations where I know I’m bad, but not as good as cases where I’m actually doing well
- In the dusk cases, where I know I don’t get knowledge from vision, it seems my evidence must be something about my psychology, because
Something similar is going on almost all the time in philosophy. Consider any thought experiment where the following two conditions are met.

1. You have a strong, and seemingly reasonable, judgment that $p$
2. You know that you don’t know that $p$

It’s worthwhile going over some examples of this
Swampman

Consider the swampman case as an objection to individualistic causal history content externalism

- The theory considered says that the meaning of terms in your mouth/head depends on your causal history, in particular on the causal connections between objects the term refers to, and your use of the terms
- Swampman is a molecule for molecule duplicate of a person, who has terms like 'rose' in his vocabulary, although he has no causal connection to roses
- That’s because Swampman was generated by a miraculous convergence of swamp gas after a freak lightening strike

Swampman doesn’t have the right kind of causal history to have any meaningful terms, according to the externalist theory in question, but intuitively when he says *I wish I had a rose*, he’s expressing a desire for a rose.
Swampman

- Note that non-individualistic externalists don’t have a problem with this case.
- Perhaps Swampman’s terms get their meaning because he’s (in a sense) one of us, and we have the right connection with roses.
- But it is a problem for some theories.
- And I think it’s a substantial problem.
- But mental content is a hard area, and perhaps tough choices will have to be made about what to give up.
- I’m pretty sure I don’t know Swampman has contentful states/talk.
- So by Williamson’s lights, I seem not to have evidence against this kind of context externalism here.
- But that’s wrong, I do have such evidence, indeed quite good evidence.
Two Kinds of Evidence

Of course, Williamson could say that psychological states are always evidence, but in some cases we also have facts as part of our evidence. But note two things about that position:

1. Since we’ve allowed that intuitions can be quite good evidence, the facts won’t do a whole lot of work.

2. Since in active philosophical disputes, knowledge is quite rare, most of the time we’ll just have intuitions.
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2. Since in active philosophical disputes, knowledge is quite rare, most of the time we’ll just have intuitions.

This is one important respect in which the Gettier cases are odd, and misleading as a focal point. Most of the time we have reasoned opinions about cases, but nothing like knowledge. And that doesn’t seem to stop us making philosophical progress.