

# *Littlejohn - How and Why Knowledge is First*

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For reference:

A condition C is **luminous**  $=_{df}$  in every case  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  C obtains, then in  $\alpha$  one is in a position to know that C obtains.

## *1 – Introduction*

We should distinguish between the *status of a belief* — is it justified? does it amount to knowledge? — and the *reasons* or *evidence* for which that belief is held.

Question: which comes first – reasons or status?

Standard response: reasons come first; it's in virtue of your reasons or evidence that your beliefs are justified/ amount to knowledge

E=K is inconsistent with the standard reasons-first response: if you evidence *just is* all the propositions that you know

- all evidence is propositional
- $p$  is a reason for you / is part of your evidence in virtue of the fact that it's known
- so, the status of a belief comes before any reasons for believing it

Two consequences of E=K (given the assumption that  $K(p)$  implies  $JB(p)$ ):

1. You cannot possess evidence unless you believe it.
2. The very possession of evidence must be understood normatively, so we can't ground epistemic normativity in terms of evidence possession<sup>1</sup>

Two central questions that any theory of evidence must answer:

**Constitution Question:** what are your reasons for believing what you do?

**Possession Question:** What does it take to have those reasons?

Knowledge-first answer: your reasons are the facts that you know

<sup>1</sup> i.e. even if we were able to explain all the facts about what a body of evidence supports, there would still be epistemic work to be done, since the very possession of evidence is a normative matter and hence must be explained by the epistemologist.

CL: reasons-first views do a crappy job of answering these questions, so they should be rejected.

## 2 – Internalism

Consider first an internalist version of the reasons-first account:

**Internalism:** Necessarily, if two subjects are in the same non-factive mental states, these subjects have the very same evidence.<sup>2</sup>

Internalism just says that your reasons supervene on your non-factive mental states.

<sup>2</sup> NB that this is a mentalist internalist account, and assuming that we have access to our non-factive mental states it's also an access internalist account

This claim is consistent with different answers to the Constitution Question my mental states and the contents of my mental states both supervene on my non-factive mental states (we might suppose), so my evidence might consist in anything that supervenes on my non-factive mental states: the states themselves, or the propositional contents of those states, or facts about those states.

But consider Davidson's argument:

1. In order for  $\phi$  to be a reason to believe  $p$ ,  $\phi$  must stand in a logical relation to the belief that  $p$
2. Experiences don't stand in logical relations to propositions
3. Beliefs do stand in logical relations to propositions (in virtue of their contents)
4. So, assuming that all reasons are mental states, reasons must be beliefs rather than experiences

Davidson's view: only a belief can justify a belief (i.e. be an epistemic reason)

Response to Davidson: experiences have content too, so there's no reason to think that beliefs but not experiences stand in the relevant logical relations

CL: 'This is a muddle'. Experiences are not their contents: they are events, and events don't entail anything and they're not entailed by anything. So while experience contents — i.e. propositions — stand in logical relations, experiences do not.

Hilarious and accurate observation from CL: same goes for beliefs — they have propositional contents but they aren't propositions and so they can't stand in logical relations; premise 3 of Davidson's argument is false. So the upshot of his argument is that beliefs cannot be

evidence. So Davidson's argument that's supposed to prove that all reasons are beliefs instead proves that no reasons are beliefs (assuming that premise 1 is true).

**BTM:** All this seems correct, but why think that premise 1 is true? Why think that all evidential relations are logical relations? Why not think that there's a related but distinct relation of *provides evidential support for* that sometimes obtains between experiences and propositional attitudes?

Note how weird CL's general picture is: in order for a reason  $\phi$  to support a belief that  $p$ ,  $\phi$  must stand in a logical relation to  $p$ . But the thing receiving evidential support from  $\phi$  is not  $p$ , it's the belief that  $p$ . So the thing that's ultimately supported by the reason  $\phi$  is not the thing that stands in a logical relation to it, but instead is something with a content that's supported by  $\phi$ . But if a reason can support a belief by standing in a logical relation to that belief's content, then why can't a reason be a belief or experience that has a content that stands in logical relation to that belief's content? In other words, why can a belief be supported by way of its content but a reason can't provide support by way of its content? Seems like an ad hoc asymmetry.

[End BTM]

On page 6 CL picks up on some ideas from his book 'Justification and the Truth-Connection' and provides a different set of considerations in support of  $E=K$ .

NB that CL's broad point in the article is to support the equation of knowledge with *evidence*, but then he spends most of his time talking about *reasons*. That's no accident.

The big idea in CL's book is that reasons for belief are the same sorts of things as reasons for feeling some way or other and the same as reason to act some way or other; it's a sort of unity of normativity thought. It sounds super weird to talk about evidence for feelings or for action, we usually talk about 'reasons' in those contexts. Since it doesn't sound weird to talk about 'reasons' for belief, CL imports the term from ethics into epistemology.

Preliminary: *motivating reasons* in ethics are the reasons for which you act; they're *your reasons*.

Case:

Agnes is mad at her neighbor. **Her reasons for being upset are things that she's cognizant of and averse to**, something like the fact that they steal her packages

Littlejohnesque claim:

It's possible to *believe* something for the very same reason that you *feel* something: Agnes's reason for believing that she should confront her neighbors over the packages is the same as her reason for feeling upset with them and is the same as her reason for confronting them.

Problem: there's no non-factive mental state that could be a reason for the feeling, the belief, and the action. What would be the mental state that she's cognizant of and averse to? There isn't one. What she's averse to is a fact about the world: that her neighbors are stealing her packages: that's the reason she feels upset and the reason that she confronts her neighbors, and that reason is not a mental state. But if reasons are the same sorts of things in all three cases, then her reason to believe isn't a mental state either.

So, the version of internalism on which reasons are mental states is false: if internalism is true, then reasons must be either the contents of non-factive mental states or facts about those states (or some other propositions that's somehow determined by one's non-factive mental states).

But in order for Agnes's reason to make it appropriate to feel upset with her neighbors or to confront them, it must actually be the case that they stole the packages: if they didn't, then she shouldn't be upset with them and she shouldn't confront them. So her reasons must be facts about the world. And since facts about the world don't supervene on Agnes's non-factive mental states, internalism is false.

### 3 – Externalism

At this point CL is assuming that reasons are *facts*.

So, while mental states are relevant to justified belief, their relevance isn't in virtue of *being* reasons; it's to *provide* reasons.

Three constraints on an account of reason possession:

1. If  $p$  is your reason for  $\phi$ -ing, you have to have the ability to be guided by the fact that  $p$  and that requires a **non-accidental** connection to  $p$ . One is not guided by  $p$  when one is merely accidentally connected to proposition  $p$ , which happens to be true (as in the Gettiered version of the pleasure machine)
2. having  $p$  as one of your reasons entails that you can and must treat  $p$  as a reason in your rational deliberation<sup>3</sup>
3. Reasons are facts involving predicating a property of a particular object; they're of the form  $Fa$ . "To grasp such things requires the

<sup>3</sup> Is this consistent with the falsity of the luminosity principle? Does it imply the KK principle?

use of... capacities to grasp that a particular belongs to a range of cases. If something doesn't involve the actualization of any such capacities, it doesn't relate us to the general and if something doesn't involve the requisite sort of generality it cannot be the sort of thing that could be true or false. Since reasons are truths, truths involve this sort of generality, and getting a grip of such generalities requires the use of conceptual capacities, the account of possession has to implicate these conceptual capacities." (9)

CL: Knowledge satisfies all three constraints. If it is *unique* in satisfying them then the E=K account is confirmed.

But, some think knowledge isn't unique in satisfying these constraints: perception does too, so E=K isn't confirmed (at the expense of E=perception, at least).

So, CL will now argue that perception doesn't satisfy these constraints.

### 3.1 – *Reasons-first and the Reconciliatory View of Perception*

In §3.1–§3.3 CL argues against the conjunction of:

**Perceptual Sufficiency:** Perceptual relations alone between you and your surroundings can put you in the position to believe things for reasons that consist of facts.

**Perceptual Dependence:** Perceptual knowledge is possible only when the subject's perceptual beliefs are held for reasons where these reasons are independently possessed because the subject bears the right perceptual relations to her surroundings.

Assumes the relational approach to perception: perception is a relation between a perceiver and things in her surroundings that perception brings into view.

Question: can we reconcile the relational approach to perception with the claim that perceptual experience has a representational content by virtue of involving the subject's conceptual capacities?

First target:

**The First Reconciliatory View:** When we have perceptual knowledge that a is F, it's the result of seeing that a is F. By seeing that a is F, we'll either have the fact that a is F or the fact that we see that a is F as part of our evidence. Seeing that a is F is understood as standing in the right visual relation to things in your surroundings and the fact that a is F is understood as the object of visual awareness. Having such facts as reasons requires an appropriate exercise of conceptual capacities

(e.g., seeing that a is F requires exercising the conceptual capacities involved in characterizing something as an F), but seeing that a is F is nevertheless a relational affair.<sup>4</sup> (10)

<sup>4</sup> CL: this is essentially McDowell's view

The First Reconciliatory View has these two features:

**Visualism:** Facts about possessed reasons for visual beliefs supervene upon facts about a subject's visual contact with her surroundings.<sup>5</sup>

- visualism ensures: same perceptual relations to the environment, same reasons for perceptual beliefs

<sup>5</sup> not just any facts about the possessed reasons: *which* reasons one possesses — the identity of the reasons possessed — for visual beliefs is determined by the subject's visual contact with her surroundings

**Content Constraint:** If S knows visually that a is F, S's visual experience has the representational content that a is F.

- this requires that "the conceptual capacities exercised in believing that a is F are active in the experience you have when you see that a is F"; sensibility brings things into view only "in concert with the operation of the understanding". (11)

Argument (p 11-12):

1. In the good case<sup>6</sup>, it's possible to have perceptual knowledge expressed by, 'This structure is a barn'.
2. The subject has this perceptual knowledge only because the experience has the same content as this belief<sup>7</sup> and because this experience justifies beliefs with this content<sup>8</sup>. [1, Visualism, and the Content Constraint]
3. In a correlative bad environmental luck case<sup>9</sup>, a subject could stand in the same visual relations to her environment that our first subject stands in with respect to hers but the belief she expresses by saying, '**This structure is a barn**' wouldn't constitute knowledge.
4. This subject would have the very same reasons for her perceptual beliefs<sup>10</sup> and an experience that would justify the belief expressed by, 'This structure is a barn' and would believe for the very same reason as the subject in the good case [(3) and Visualism].
5. **The subject in the bad case would thus know that the structure is a barn** [(4) and the assumption that if you believe something for the reason that *p*, you can  $\phi$  for the reason that *p* if you  $\phi$  in the belief that *p*<sup>11</sup>].

<sup>6</sup> CL is somewhat unclear what he means by the 'good/ bad' cases. This comes in the context of a discussion of environmental luck (i.e. fake barn cases), which are typically taken to be such that you don't know that there's a barn in front of you (even though there is one) because it's just lucky that you aren't looking at one of the fake ones. But in (1) CL says that in the good case it is possible to know, so presumably your belief isn't *too* lucky?

<sup>7</sup> by the Content Constraint

<sup>8</sup> by Visualism

<sup>9</sup> As before, it's not clear what exactly the bad environmental luck case is supposed to be. What he does tell us is that, in the bad case you don't know. Presumably it's just a case in which too much luck is involved in forming your belief in order for it to amount to knowledge?

<sup>10</sup> by Visualism

<sup>11</sup>  $\phi$  here ranges over beliefs, feelings, actions, etc. This follows from CL's argument at the end of §2.

Clarification: why does (5) follow from (4)?

Suppose you believed that you were out of gin for the reason that one of your guests just poured the remaining gin into the shaker. If this is your reason for believing this, this could be your reason for being disappointed and your reason for reaching for the vodka. It couldn't be your reason for feeling this or doing that unless you knew that one of your guests just poured the remaining gin into the shaker. You can only believe something for the reason that  $p$  if you're able to believe, do, and feel further things for that reason. Thus, if responding in these further ways requires knowledge of  $p$ , your belief in  $p$  would have to constitute knowledge. (12)

Lesson of the argument: (3) and (5) are inconsistent, so we've got to reject one of them.

Why is this a problem for the defender of the First Reconciliatory View (i.e. for McDowell)?

We shouldn't deny (1): that's tantamount to the claim that our perceptual knowledge is limited to facts about appearances.

**BTM:** but wait: the contradiction is between (3) and (5), neither of which depend on (1), so how could denying (1) resolve the inconsistency? Similarly, what's the point of (2), which doesn't play any supporting role for (3) or (5) either?

Here's what CL actually says:

McDowell suggests... that a subject in an [bad?] environmental luck case neither sees that the structure is a barn nor knows that it's a barn. Since he wants to use the visual relations the subject bears to her environment to determine what she's in a position to know, it looks like he'll have to abandon Visualism, the Content Constraint, or (3). Unfortunately, it seems that (3) is rather plausible, particularly if you think, as he does, that his view vindicates the intuitions that relationalists appeal to in motivating their view, such as the intuition that, "perception places our surroundings in view" (2008: 14). **The presence or absence of unseen fakes should have no bearing whatever upon whether vision places your surroundings in view for you.** (12)

DISCLOSURE: I can't follow what CL is actually saying here, and I don't understand the structure of his argument. But here's what I think he's getting at:

McDowell thinks that in the good case a visual experience of the barn 'places your surroundings in view for you'. This sounds a lot like saying that the experience puts you in 'visual contact with your surroundings'; suppose they're equivalent expressions. Visualism tells us that 'Facts about possessed reasons for visual beliefs supervene upon facts about a subject's visual contact with her surroundings', so anyone in 'visual contact with [the same] surroundings', i.e. anyone

with the same surroundings placed in their view, should have the same reasons. By the Content Constraint, when one is in contact with a barn, those reasons consist in something like the proposition 'the structure is a barn'. Lesson: for McDowell, in the good case 'there structure is a barn' is one of your reasons, and on that basis your belief that there is a barn amounts to knowledge.

Uncontroversially, in the bad case (in which there are tons of fake barns around) your belief that 'the structure is a barn' is too lucky to result in knowledge. But although fake barns in the environment are inconsistent with *knowledge*, they don't affect whether your visual experience of the real barn 'places [the barn] in view', i.e. whether you're in 'visual contact with [the barn]'. So, by Visualism and the Content Constraint, you have the same reasons for believing that 'the structure is a barn' in both cases.

But, a proposition could be a reason for belief only if it could also be a reason for feeling some way or acting some way, and nothing can be a reason for feeling or for acting unless it's *known*. So if 'the structure is a barn' can be a reason for belief then you know it. Since your reasons are the same in the good and bad cases, you must know it in both cases. But you don't know it in the bad case, in which your true belief involves too much luck to amount to knowledge.

So there's the contradiction: in the bad case you both know and don't know that 'the structure is a barn'.

NB: one could also just deny the common intuition that you don't know in the bad case. CL pushes back on this intuition with a couple of relevantly similar cases in which (he claims) it's clear that you don't know:

**Lucky Penny:** Jill has a lucky penny. She hasn't seen other pennies before. Her brother stole her lucky penny and took it with him to school. He dropped it. Someone picked it up but later dropped it. It worked its way across the city. A week later Jill was on a school trip when she looked down and saw a penny that happened to be her lucky penny. "It's my lucky penny!" she said.

**White Diamond:** Agnes had a bucket of fake diamonds marked 'diamonds' that she left in her flat to attract the attention of any jewel thieves that might break in. Each stone in the bucket looked like a real diamond. What she didn't realize is that one of the hundreds of stones in the bucket was indeed a real diamond. That stone happened to be sitting on top. A thief knocked the bucket over clumsily, saw the stones spilled across the floor, saw that the bucket was labeled diamonds, and grabbed the first stone that she could believing it to be a diamond. She left the others because she thought that she heard someone coming. She happened to grab the only diamond in the flat and believes that she has a diamond.



### 3.2 – *The Second Reconciliatory View*

**The Second Reconciliatory View:** When we have perceptual knowledge that *a* is *F*, it's the result of seeing that *a* is *F*. By seeing that *a* is *F*, we'll either have the fact that *a* is *F* or the fact that we see that *a* is *F* as part of our evidence. Seeing that *a* is *F* is understood as standing in the right visual relation to things in your surroundings when further conditions are met [FRV additional stipulation here] (i.e., conditions that don't supervene upon the visual relations between the perceiver and her environment). Having such facts as reasons requires an appropriate exercise of conceptual capacities (e.g., seeing that *a* is *F* requires exercising the conceptual capacities involved in characterizing something as an *F*), but seeing that *a* is *F* is nevertheless a relational affair.

NB: the only change from the First Reconciliatory View here is that we've here dropped the FRV's additional stipulation that seeing that *a* is *F* requires understood to require "...that *a* is *F* is understood as the object of visual awareness"

CL: it's not clear what the positive proposal is supposed to be – it can't be that "a perceiver stands in the relation of visual awareness to something that's her reason and thereby is able to believe things for reasons that she's visually aware of" because that's precisely the feature of the FRV that's dropped in the SRV.

Positive reason to reject the thesis that 'visual awareness that puts us in a position to believe things for reasons':

#### **The Generality Argument**

1. Everything we perceive is particular.
2. The facts that we know perceptually aren't particular, but general, as they are facts that have to do with the categories that the particulars we see belong to.
3. Thus, the objects of perceptual awareness are not the objects of perceptual knowledge.

Why 1?

But don't we see that the sun has risen? And don't we thus also see that this is true? That the sun has risen is no object which sends out rays that reach my eyes, no visible thing as the sun itself is (Frege quoted in Travis 2013: 123). (15)

BTM: maybe, but doesn't experience generally consist of particular objects and the general properties of those objects? So isn't there generality in my perceptual experience? So what's the big disconnect between what I experience and what I come to know? Seems

like there's an account of 'the objects of perceptual knowledge', i.e. propositions, that's doing a lot of work in the background here.

### 3.3 – A Third Reconciliatory View?

McDowell's new view: abandon the idea that seeing is a matter of being made visually aware of facts (due to the Generality Argument above).

Question: what's the role of conceptual capacity in seeing?

Relationst's answer: conceptual capacities play no role in seeing itself, i.e. in bringing particulars into view, but are used only to make judgements about the particulars that are seen (e.g. the judgment that a is F)

McDowell's answer: conceptual capacities play an essential role in seeing, i.e. in bringing particulars into view, and it's this conceptualization that allows the objects of perception to be general, i.e. to be facts. (CL tells us that McDowell has since backed off of this view, possibly embracing something like the TRV, on which conceptual capacities are essential for a different reason.)

**The Third Reconciliatory View:** What we see isn't ever a fact or something that's true. Nevertheless, conceptual capacities are active in experience and the things we see are presented as being instances of kinds or as having properties. The conceptual capacities do not operate on things that are present in experience anyway; rather, they are active in bringing particulars into experience and so into view. It is because these things are brought into view, in part, because of the operation of these conceptual capacities, our predicative judgments are based on reasons.

CL's objection:

[The representational character of experience is] essential to [any] account of perceptual knowledge that says that [perceptual] knowledge arises because our perceptual judgments are based on reasons... [What this shows is] that it [is] not essential to our understanding of perceptual knowledge that [perceptual knowledge] is constituted by beliefs based on reasons:

#### *The Problem of Transduction*

1. If we're not visually aware of facts, either experience has no propositional content or there's a transductive process that takes non-propositional input (e.g., an object seen) and yields a propositional content for visual experience.
2. If the former, the propositional content of experience isn't epistemically essential because we have perceptual knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> i.e. we do in fact have some perceptual knowledge, so if experience lacks propositional content, then propositional content can't be essential to having perceptual knowledge.

3. If the latter, the propositional content of experience isn't epistemically essential because there's a possible creature with our perceptual knowledge that acquires this knowledge without this intervening process yielding a propositional content of experience. Instead, there's a transductive process that takes non-propositional input and yields content for visual belief.<sup>13</sup>
4. If we're not visually aware of facts, the propositional content of experience isn't epistemically essential. [from 1,2,3]
5. We're not visually aware of facts. [assumption]
6. The propositional content of experience isn't epistemically essential.

Shorter: once we agree that what we perceive lacks propositional content, why not say that the reason produced by experience is the content of a belief<sup>14</sup> rather than the content of the experience? What theoretical reason do we have to keep the middleman?

So how might the two-step transductive process of Clayton's work?

...what's present in experience is always particular and so a's belonging to the range of cases that makes for an F's being present cannot be present to the perceiver through her conscious experience of a. What is present is something of a's that merits the classification of a as being an F. The perceiver's knowledge that a is F depends upon whether she has the ability to classify things as F when aware of the features of a that merit this classification. It doesn't require some representation of a as being F that's prior to belief or judgment. (17)

NB that the Problem of Transduction doesn't show that perceptual knowledge does not in fact involve experiences with propositional content (as CL concedes).

(BTM: Also note that the conclusion only follows given (undefended) premise (3), which essentially just asserts the conclusion: saying that  $A \& \neg B$  is possible *just is* saying that  $B$  is not essential for  $A$ , so this argument is question begging.)

So, CL's opponents could always produce a positive reason to think that experiences with propositional contents are necessary. But what would that theory look like?

A trilemma for the TRV: when we judge that a is an F, what is the basis of our judgement? Three possibilities:

- (a) something particular that's present in experience,
- (b) something representational
- (c) something present in experience that's representational

<sup>13</sup> translation: on this horn of the dilemma we're supposing that our transductive process goes like this: non-propositional input → propositional content of *experience* → propositional knowledge. CL is here claiming that the middle step is inessential because there could be a creature whose transductive process goes: non-propositional input → perceptual knowledge.

Question: is the issue at hand whether propositional contents of experience are essential *for us* to obtain perceptual knowledge, or essential for any possible creature to obtain perceptual knowledge?

<sup>14</sup> note that what CL really wants is for the reason to be something that you know, so not just any belief content will do.

(c) is inconsistent with the conclusion of the Generality argument and McDowell seems to have rejected it, so CL does too

(a) but my judgement is propositional, and the particulars in experience are not, so the sort of logical relation that Davidson and CL want is missing: no evidential relation without a logical relation

(b) in order for the judgment that  $a$  is  $F$  to be supported by a reason, that reason must be propositional, i.e. general. But if it's general it's not present in perceptual consciousness, so it can't be a *perceptual* reason

#### 4 – Evidence and Justification

Consider the following closure principle:

**J-Closure:** If you justifiably believe  $X$  and know that  $Y$  is a logical consequence of  $X$ , you can justifiably infer  $Y$  if you come to believe  $Y$  by means of competent deduction.

One explanation for the truth of J-Closure is J-Reasons:

**J-Reasons:** If you justifiably believe  $X$  and can justifiably infer  $X$ 's known consequences, you'd be able to  $\phi$  for the reason that  $X$ .

CL also claims that knowledge is essentially related to acting for reasons:

**A-K:** You cannot  $\phi$  for the reason that  $X$  unless you know  $X$ <sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> NB the similarity to TW's claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion

But J-Reasons and A-K together entail:

**J-K:** If you justifiably believe  $X$ , you know  $X$ .

CL's 'plausible candidate for the fundamental norm of belief':

**RN:** You shouldn't believe  $p$  unless your belief that  $p$  is true can provide you with reasons that can be your reasons for  $\phi$ -ing.

Since CL thinks that knowing that  $p$  is what provides you with reasons for  $\phi$ -ing, it follows that the fundamental norm governing belief is:

**KN:** You shouldn't believe  $p$  unless you know  $p$ .