

WAYS OF KNOWING

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1

I know that the laptop on which I am writing these words is dusty. How do I know? I can see that it is dusty. Seeing that it is dusty is a way of knowing that it is dusty. How come? According to what I'm going to call the entailment view, 'S sees that P' entails 'S knows that P' and it is only because this is so that seeing that the laptop is dusty qualifies as a way of knowing that it is dusty. Generalizing from this, the entailment view concludes that Φ -ing that P is a way of knowing that P if and only if 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'.

It's not difficult to see that this can't be right. There are cases in which 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P' but in which Φ -ing that P is not a way of knowing that P. For example, regretting that P is not a way of knowing that P even if, as some claim, 'S regrets that P' entails 'S knows that P'.¹ And, of course, 'S knows that P' entails 'S knows that P', but knowing that P is presumably not a way of knowing that P. Equally, there are cases in which 'S Φ s that P' does not entail 'S knows that P' but in which Φ -ing that P is a way of knowing that P. Reading it in his autobiography is surely a way of knowing that Quine was born in Akron but 'I read that Quine was born in Akron' doesn't entail 'I know that Quine was born in Akron'. In cases of the first kind Φ -ing that P doesn't count as a way of knowing that P because, despite the entailment, the observation that S Φ s that P fails to explain how S knows that P. In cases of the second kind it is possible to explain how S knows that P by observing that S Φ s that P even though there is no entailment from Φ -ing that P to knowing that P.

All of this points to an explanatory conception of ways of knowing. According to this conception, which is the one that I want to flesh out and defend here, Φ -ing that P is a way of knowing that P just if it is possible satisfactorily to explain how S knows that P by pointing out that S Φ s that P. This allows seeing that P to count as a way of knowing that P if it is true that, as Snowdon puts it, we treat it as ‘totally unproblematic that someone’s knowledge that P can be explained by saying that they saw that P’ (1998: 301). However, it is not obvious that our treating such explanations as totally unproblematic commits us to thinking that ‘S sees that P’ entails ‘S knows that P’.² Even if this entailment holds, it is a further question whether it explains the explanatory link between ‘sees that P’ and ‘knows that P’. The other side of the coin is that regretting that P is not a way of knowing that P because it is unacceptable to explain someone’s knowledge that P on the basis that they regret that P. It remains unacceptable even if ‘S regrets that P’ entails ‘S knows that P’.

The explanatory conception is different from some other conceptions of ways of knowing, including the one defended by Williamson in Knowledge and its Limits. I will say more about these differences below. It is closer to the idea that ways of knowing are ways of coming to know. One might think, for example, that seeing that my laptop is dusty is a way of coming to know that it dusty (assuming that this is something that I don’t know already), and that that is why it makes sense to explain my knowledge that the laptop is dusty by pointing out that I can see that it is. As we will see, however, even the notion of a way of coming to know doesn’t quite capture what the explanatory conception of ways of knowing is getting at.³ I might be able to explain how I know that P by saying ‘I remember that P’ but it is rarely appropriate to describe remembering that P as a way of coming to know that P.

The explanatory conception of ways of knowing and of the link between seeing and knowing raises a lot of questions. Here are the three that I want to discuss:

1. Is it true that someone's knowledge that P can be unproblematically explained by saying that they see (or perceive) that P? Call this the question of perception. If the answer to this question is 'no', then either seeing that P is not a way of knowing that P or the explanatory conception of what it takes for seeing that P to be a way of knowing that P is no good.
2. Are perceptual explanations of one's knowledge – ones that appeal to what one perceives to be the case- superior to ones that appeal to what one has read or heard in conversation? This is the question of priority.
3. If it is true that someone's knowledge that P can be satisfactorily explained by saying that they see that P, what makes it true? If it is not the fact that 'S sees that P' entails 'S knows that P' what other explanation is there? More generally, what makes an explanation of S's knowledge that P a satisfactory explanation? Call this the question of explanation.

The obvious thing to say about the first question is that it all depends on what 'P' is. Trivially, my knowledge that P cannot be unproblematically explained by saying that I see that P if P is not a proposition that can be perceived to be true.⁴ If P is a proposition like 'my laptop is dusty' then it is more plausible that my knowledge can be explained by pointing out that I see that P, though even this might be disputed. There is more on this issue in part 2. On the question of priority, suppose that someone tells me that my laptop is dusty. 'He told me' can be just as good an explanation of my knowledge that the laptop is dusty as 'I can see that it is'. Nevertheless, it is arguable that there is still a sense in which

perceptual explanations have a kind of finality that other explanations lack. Again, there is more on this below, in part 2.

The question of explanation is tricky. A minimalist would say that (a) by and large we have no trouble distinguishing between satisfactory and unsatisfactory explanations of a person's knowledge and that (b) nothing makes an explanation a satisfactory explanation beyond our willingness to accept it. The implication is that no further explanation can be or needs to be given as to why we accept the explanations that we accept and reject the ones that we reject. There are good and bad explanations but our explanations cannot themselves be explained; they have no deeper rationale. Minimalism should therefore be interpreted as rejecting the question of explanation or as denying that it is one to which a substantive or informative answer can be given.⁵

Another option is reductionism. This says that it is possible to give an informative answer to the question of explanation but only on the basis of an analysis of the concept of knowledge into more basic concepts. The idea is that (a) we can't say in general terms what makes a particular explanation of someone's knowledge that P a good explanation unless we have an account of what it is to know that P and that (b) to give an account of what it is to know that P one needs to come up with non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that P. In effect, therefore, what the reductionist is saying is that the concept of knowledge is explanatorily prior to the concept of a way of knowing; we understand what knowing is and on that basis can figure out what counts as a way of knowing.

I will have more to say about minimalism and reductionism in part 4. The response to the question of explanation that I want to defend is neither minimalist nor reductionist though it is much closer in spirit to the former than to the latter. But let's not get ahead of

ourselves. There are many other issues that need to be tackled before getting round to the ins and outs of minimalism and reductionism. The next part will say a bit more about the questions of perception and of priority and will also defend the claim that the entailment view fails to provide a satisfactory response to the question of explanation. Part 3 will bring the explanatory account of ways of knowing into sharper focus by comparing it with Williamson's account. Finally, part 4 will try to develop a response to the question of explanation that keeps hold of what is right about minimalism while avoiding its excesses.

2

Let's start with the question of perception. We have already seen that a person's knowledge that P can't be unproblematically explained by saying that he sees that P if P is not the sort of proposition that can be perceived to be true. This is complicated because it isn't always obvious what can and cannot be perceived to be the case. If I'm asked how I know that someone is angry I might say that I can see that he is. But can I literally see that a person is angry?⁶ If not then the proposed explanation fails. Even if one concentrates on apparently more straightforward cases perceptual explanations won't always be successful. Suppose that my answer to the question 'How do you know that your laptop is dusty?' is 'I can see that it is'. This won't be unproblematic if it is too dark or there is something in the way. If it is too dark then I don't see that the laptop is dusty; perceptual explanations only work if the conditions are right. But once it is agreed that I see that P then nothing more needs to be done to explain how I know that P.⁷ In this sense the answer to the question of perception is 'yes'. Trivially, my knowledge that P can't be explained by reference to the fact that I see that P if I can't see that P. It doesn't follow that it can't be unproblematically explained in this way in cases in which I can and do see that P.

Next, the question of priority. Compare these exchanges:

(A) Question: how do you know that P? Answer: I can see that P. Question: yes, but do you really know that P?

(B) Question: how do you know that P? Answer: I read that P. Question: yes, but do you really know that P?

The second question in (A) is odd in a way that the second question in (B) is not. If I accept that you see that P then there is no room for the further challenge ‘do you really know?’, unless this is a way of questioning whether you really see that P. But I can accept that you read that P and still ask whether you really know that P. I might want to know, for example, where you read that P. If you reveal that you read it in a tabloid then what I ought to be worrying about is not whether you read that P but whether you thereby know that P.

This is not to deny that reading that P can be a way of knowing that P. Any sane account of ways of knowing had better accept that, for example, it is possible for one to know that Quine was born in Akron by reading his autobiography. The point of comparing (A) and (B) is not to suggest that non-perceptual explanations are no good but to draw attention to the fact that perceptual explanations of a person’s knowledge have a kind of finality that many other explanations lack. They are not open to the same challenges, and this is one sense in which the answer to the question of priority is ‘yes’.

On this account, scepticism can still get going if there are reasons for thinking that we can never simply see that P, where P is a proposition about non-psychological reality.⁸ For example, in his work on scepticism Stroud makes a lot of the ‘anthropological fact’ that ‘human beings get much of their knowledge of the world somehow from sense-perception’ (2000b: 129). He argues that ‘the difficulty comes in philosophy when we try to see exactly

how sense-perception works to give us knowledge of the world' (2000a: 5). His idea is that what makes it hard to understand how sense-perception works to give us knowledge of the world is the assumption that we don't perceive the world around us, at least not directly. If the direct objects of perception are ideas or sense data then 'it seems at least possible to perceive what we do without thereby knowing something about the things around us' (Stroud 2000a: 5-6). It is not in dispute here that 'whoever sees that P thereby knows that P' (Stroud 2004: 167). What is in dispute is whether anyone does ever actually see that P. This puts no pressure at all on the idea that if one sees that P nothing further needs to be done to explain how one knows that P. Indeed, far from putting pressure on this idea Stroud's discussion assumes that such explanations really are fine.

How, then, is the efficacy of perceptual explanations of knowledge to be accounted for? One view is that the answer to the question of explanation is that S's knowledge that P can be explained by saying that S sees that P because, and only because, 'S sees that P' entails 'S knows that P'. More generally, the idea is that 'by Φ -ing that P' is a satisfactory answer to 'How does S know that P?' if and only if 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'. Is this right? One issue is whether it is true that 'S sees that P' entails 'S knows that P'. Another is whether, even if it is true, it is the entailment that accounts for the explanatory link between seeing and knowing.

The claim that 'S sees that P' entails 'S knows that P' is controversial.⁹ For example, suppose that S sees that it is raining but doesn't believe that it is raining because he has the mistaken belief that his senses are deceiving him. Isn't this a case in which S sees that it is raining but doesn't know that it is raining? Intuitions vary but suppose for the sake of argument we grant that the best description of the case is that it is one in which S doesn't

see that it is raining and that 'S sees that P' does indeed entail 'S knows that P'.¹⁰ Does this account for the explanatory link between seeing and knowing? The first thing to say is that it is not true that for 'by Φ -ing that P' to be a good answer to 'How does S know that P?' it must be the case that 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'. My knowledge that Quine was born in Akron can be explained by saying that I read it in his autobiography even though 'I read that P' hardly entails 'I know that P'. This doesn't prove that the explanatory connection specifically between seeing that P and knowing that P is not due to the fact that the former entails the latter but it does put pressure on this idea. A better approach would be to say that 'by Φ -ing that P' is an acceptable answer to 'How do you know that P?' when Φ -ing that P is what gives one the knowledge that P. As the Quine example shows, this can be so whether or not 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'.

Another way of bringing out the irrelevance of entailment is to notice that there are many examples in which something of the form 'S Φ s that P' entails that S knows that P but in which 'by Φ -ing that P' would be a bad answer to 'How does S know that P?'. As we have already noticed, 'by regretting that P' is not an acceptable response to this question even though 'S regrets that P' entails 'S knows that P'. What is more, this is not an isolated case. As Unger points out, there are many sentences of the form 'S verbs that P' that entail their corresponding simple knowledge sentences.¹¹ 'S admits that P' entails 'S knows that P'. 'S reveals that P' entails 'S knows that P'. And, of course, 'S knows that P' entails 'S knows that P'. Yet none of these knowledge-entailing sentences can properly be used to explain how S knows that P. So entailment is a double irrelevance; for a sentence of the form 'S verbs that P' to provide a satisfactory response to 'How does S know that P?' it is neither necessary nor sufficient that 'S verbs that P' entails 'S knows that P'.

Given that the entailment view fails to give a convincing answer the question of explanation what would be a better answer? I will come back to this question in part 4. In the meantime, there are some other points that are worth noting. So far, I have taken it that ways of knowing are propositional attitudes, that is, that a person's way of knowing that P is something of the form 'S Φ s that P'. Yet there are informative answers to 'How do you know that P?' that aren't of this form. Consider this exchange from Austin:

'There's a bittern at the bottom of the garden'

'How do you know?'

'I was brought up in the fens.'¹²

Being brought up in the fens is not a way of knowing that there is a bittern at the bottom of the garden but this is not something that the explanatory conception needs to deny. It can point out that if Φ -ing is a way of knowing that P then it should make sense to say things like 'S Φ -ed and thereby knew that P'. But it doesn't make sense to say that S was brought up in the fens and thereby knew that there is a bittern at the bottom of the garden; equally, 'by being brought up in the fens' is not an acceptable answer to 'how do you know that there's a bittern at the bottom of your garden?'. The question to which it is an acceptable answer is 'how are you in a position to know about bitterns?'.¹²

Now consider this exchange:

'My cigarette lighter is under the desk'

'How do you know?'

'I can see it'

Here, 'I can see it' is an answer to 'how do you know that your lighter is under the desk?'. 'By seeing it' is an appropriate response to this question, and you can also report that I saw

it under the desk and thereby knew that it is under the desk. Seeing the lighter is under the desk is therefore a way of knowing that that is where it is despite the fact that seeing the lighter under the desk is (a) not a propositional attitude and (b) doesn't entail that I know that the lighter is under the desk. I can see the lighter there and yet not know that it is under the desk because I fail to recognize it. Nevertheless, seeing the lighter under the desk is, in the right circumstances, a way of knowing that it is under the desk.

The explanatory conception of ways of knowing has no problems with any of this. It has already rejected that idea that genuine explanations of one's knowledge that P must entail that one knows that P and it has no particular interest in defending the idea that ways of knowing must be propositional attitudes. Indeed, it takes the cigarette lighter dialogue as showing why such a claim would be indefensible. When it comes to what counts as a way of knowing the explanatory conception is pretty relaxed. The most that it insists on is that ways of knowing are expressible by sentences of the form 'S verbs'.¹³ It doesn't insist that a satisfactory explanation of someone's knowledge that P must always be something of the form 'S verbs that P'. It doesn't insist on this because it wants to allow that reading books and talking to people are also ways of knowing about the world around us. In this respect, and in some others too, the explanatory conception, with its focus on what it is to explain how someone knows, is much less restrictive than some other notable accounts of ways of knowing. In particular, it is much less restrictive than Williamson's account, and it is to this account that I now want to turn.

3

Williamson brings ways of knowing into his discussion of the nature of knowing by means of an analogy:

[C]ompare the state of knowing with the property of being coloured, the colour property which something has if it has if it has any colour property at all. If something is coloured, then it has a more specific colour property; it is red or green or....Although that specific colour may happen to lack a name in our language, we could always introduce such a name, perhaps pointing to the case as a paradigm. We may say that being coloured is being red or green or..., if the list is understood as open-ended, and the concept is coloured is not identified with the disjunctive concept..... Similarly, if one knows that A then there is a specific way in which one knows; one can see or remember or... that A. Although that specific way may happen to lack a name in our language, we could always introduce such a name, perhaps pointing to the case as a paradigm. We may say that knowing that A is seeing or remembering or... that A, if the list is understood as open-ended, and the concept knows is not identified with the disjunctive concept (2000: 34).

The relationship between being coloured and being, say, red is a determinable-determinate relationship so the implication of this passage is that the same is true of the relationship between knowing and specific ways of knowing. On this account, seeing that P is a 'way' of knowing in something like the sense in which being red is a 'way' of being coloured.

Being red wouldn't count as a way of being coloured if it were not the case that 'X is red' entails 'X is coloured'. By the same token, Φ -ing that P wouldn't count as what Williamson calls a 'way of knowing' that P if it were not the case that 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows that P'. To this extent Williamson can agree with the entailment view. On the other hand, there is nothing in his discussion that commits him to thinking that it is sufficient for Φ -ing that P to be a way of knowing that P that 'S Φ s that P' entails 'S knows

that P'. So his view of ways of knowing isn't the entailment view; he doesn't have to say that regretting that P is a way of knowing that P.¹⁴

How does Williamson's conception of ways of knowing differ from the explanatory conception? The thing to bear in mind here is that ways of knowing in Williamson's sense must be factive stative attitudes. An attitude is factive 'if and only if, necessarily, one has it only to truths' (2000: 34). Attitudes that constitute states rather than processes are stative. So, for example, remembering is a state whereas proving is a process. In these terms, the basic idea is that 'knowing is the most general factive stative attitude, one which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all' (2000: 34). Thus, 'if you see that it is raining, then you know that it is raining. If you remember that it was raining, then you know that it was raining'(2000: 37).

It should now be apparent that there are several interrelated respects in which Williamson's conception of ways of knowing is much more restrictive than the explanatory conception. For Williamson ways of knowing are (a) attitudes (b) stative, and (c) entail knowledge. The explanatory conception accepts none of these restrictions. It has already emerged that the explanatory account rejects (a) and (c). It also rejects (b). There are circumstances in which 'by proving it' or 'by working it out' will be acceptable answers to 'How do you know that P?' even though 'prove' and 'work out' aren't stative. Proving that P can be a way of knowing that P, at least as far as the explanatory conception is concerned.

A further difference between the two conceptions concerns the principle that if one knows that P there must be a specific way in which one knows. For Williamson this is as indisputable as the claim that if something is coloured it must have a more specific colour

property. Is something similar true on the explanatory conception? That is, if one knows that P must there be an informative answer to the question ‘How do you know that P?’? If not then one can know that P without there being what the explanatory conception calls a ‘way of knowing that P’. The issue that comes to mind here is self-knowledge. It has been argued that, as Hampshire puts it, ‘he who reports that he is currently experiencing a certain sensation cannot intelligibly be asked how he knows that he is’ (1979: 282-3). This is an occasion when the question ‘How do you know’ would be ‘at least absurd, and perhaps unintelligible’ (1979: 282). The reason is that ‘it is already shown, in the grammar and vocabulary of the statement’ that the person making it ‘is in the best possible position to know that his statement is true’ (1979: 283). If the question ‘How do you know that you are in pain?’ isn’t intelligible then it is not one to which there is an intelligible answer. In that case it looks as though one can know that one is in pain without there being a way in which one knows it.

The most straightforward response to this would be to deny that he who reports that he is currently experiencing a certain sensation cannot intelligibly be asked how he knows that he is. What is true is that this question is conversationally inappropriate but that is a different matter. It’s not that the question lacks an answer but that the answer is so obvious as to make the question pointless; I know that I am in pain by feeling it. That is my ‘way of knowing’. A different response would be to reject the claim that one can properly be said to know that one is in pain.¹⁵ If one knows that one is in pain the question ‘How do you know?’ would need to have an informative answer but ‘by feeling it’ is not an informative answer. Finally, one might just accept that one can know that one is currently experiencing

a certain sensation without there being any way in which one knows it, any suitable answer to the question ‘How do you know?’.

This is not the place to decide between these three responses. For all that has been said so far the explanatory conception of ways of knowing isn’t committed to rejecting the third response.¹⁶ On this conception, the idea that one can know that P even if there isn’t a way in which one knows it isn’t as obviously paradoxical as it would be on Williamson’s conception. It isn’t as paradoxical for the simple reason that the explanatory conception doesn’t regard the relationship between knowing and ways of knowing as a determinable-determinate relationship. This is what makes it possible for it to be so much less restrictive than Williamson’s conception. One would only think that one can’t know without there being a specific way in which one knows, or that ways of knowing must be factive stative attitudes, if one is committed to the determinable-determinate model. And one good reason not to commit oneself to this model is that one can then afford to be more relaxed about what counts as a way of knowing.

If ‘ways of knowing’ aren’t determinates of a determinable what are they? One idea is that they are ways of coming to know. Why, for example, is ‘I can see that P’ often an informative response to ‘How do you know that P?’? Because seeing that P is a way of coming to know that P. The same goes for reading that P. Reading in his autobiography that Quine was born in Akron is a way of coming to know that he was born in Akron, and it is surely this that makes it acceptable to explain my knowledge that Quine was born in Akron by saying that I read it in his autobiography. Yet there are also cases in which one’s way of knowing that P needn’t be one’s way of coming to know that P. How do I know that I spent last year in Kenya? I remember. Is that how I came to know that I spent last year in

Kenya? No. Yet the explanatory conception must allow that remembering that P is a way of knowing that P; it must allow this because saying that I remember spending last autumn in Kenya explains how I know.

This is not to deny that a good many of the ways of knowing that the explanatory conception recognizes are also ways of coming to know. Nor is it to deny that remembering that P can sometimes be a way of coming to know that P. Still, the fact remains that it won't be accurate, on the explanatory conception, to define ways of knowing as ways of coming to know. Explaining how someone knows and figuring out how they came to know are two different things, and it is by reference to the former rather than the latter that ways of knowing should be understood. This takes us straight back to some of the questions that I raised in part 1. In particular, it seems that the explanatory conception owes us an account of what it takes for a given response to the question 'How do you know?' to count as a satisfactory response. Given the wide range of responses to this question that would ordinarily be regarded as acceptable (even the range of responses of the 'S verbs that P' form), an obvious question is: what unifies them? What makes them all acceptable? This is the question of explanation so now would be a good time to return to this question.

4

Minimalism says that (a) by and large we have no trouble distinguishing between good and bad explanations of our knowledge and that (b) nothing makes an explanation a satisfactory explanation beyond our willingness to accept it. Neither claim is plausible. The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable explanations is far from straightforward, and we often have trouble drawing it. For example, if someone claims that mugging people on the tube is wrong it's not clear what would be an acceptable answer to 'How do you

know?', assuming that this question even makes sense. For example, would 'I can see that it is' be an acceptable answer? If not, what would be acceptable? These are some of the hard questions that keep moral philosophers busy and they bring out the obvious point that while it is sometimes obvious whether a particular response to 'How do you know?' is satisfactory often it isn't.

The second component of minimalism is also too strong. Consider these exchanges:

(C) Question: how do you know that your laptop is dusty? Answer: I can see that it is.

(D) Question: how do you know that your laptop is dusty? Answer: I imagine that it is.

The obvious thing to think is that in normal circumstances (C) provides a better answer to its question than (D). If minimalism is right then this assessment has no deeper rationale; it's just a brute fact that we accept 'by seeing it' as a better answer than 'by imagining it' and that is all there is to it. But this isn't all there is to it and the difference in acceptability does have a deeper rationale. The obvious rationale is that perception is reliable; it produces 'a high ratio of true beliefs' (Goldman 1992: 160). In contrast, imagination doesn't produce a high ratio of true beliefs; by and large, it doesn't even produce beliefs let alone ones that are largely true. So it is hardly surprising that we don't usually find 'by imagining it' an acceptable answer to 'how do you know?'

Why does reliability matter? Reliabilists have a ready made answer to this question. Simple reliabilism says that a person S knows that P if and only if P is true, S believes that P, and S's belief that P is caused by a reliable process. Given that knowledge requires reliability it makes perfect sense for us to think that (C) is in better shape than (D). The aim

is to explain how someone knows that P and the suggestion is that a good explanation will need to be grounded in a good account of what it is to know that P. If reliabilism gives such an account then it explains why some explanations are better than others; specifically, it makes it plausible that issues of reliability can be used to screen out bad explanations and to vindicate good ones.

We have now arrived at a form of reductionism. Remember that reductionism is the view (a) we can't say what makes a particular explanation of someone's knowledge that P a good explanation unless we have an account of what it is to know that P and that (b) to give an account of what it is to know that P one needs to come up with non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that P. The reliabilist critique of minimalism can be seen as endorsing both claims. Reliabilism gives conditions for knowing that are supposed to be non-circular, necessary, and sufficient. It assesses (C) and (D) on the basis of these conditions and says that it wouldn't be possible to explain why (C) is better than (D) other than on this basis. This is a reductionist approach to the question of explanation as well as a form of reductionism about knowledge.

What, if anything, is wrong with this? One question is whether reliabilism comes up with conditions for knowing that are genuinely sufficient. It's not difficult to think of cases in which S's true belief that P is caused by a reliable process but in which S still doesn't know that P.¹⁷ On reflection, however, this doesn't matter for the purposes of explaining why (C) is in better shape than (D). What matters is that reliability is necessary for knowledge, not whether reliabilism provides adequate necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing. As long as reliability is necessary for knowledge we already have a rationale for liking (C) but not (D). This is where reductionism goes wrong. By insisting

on necessary and sufficient conditions as the basis of a satisfactory response to the question of explanation it makes itself vulnerable to arguments for the hypothesis that ‘the concept knows cannot be analysed into more basic concepts (Williamson 2000: 33).¹⁸ These arguments may or may not be convincing but it is unwise to make everything depend on finding an analysis of the concept of knowledge. Better to stick with necessary conditions and to explain why (C) is better than (D) on this basis.

So far so good but now consider this example: when Mystic Molly sees in her crystal ball that P it is almost always the case that P. She has never seen (in the ordinary sense) my laptop but asserts that it is dusty. This leads to the following exchange:

(E) Question: how do you know that my laptop is dusty? Answer: I can see in my crystal ball that it is.

Is this answer acceptable? If not it needs to be explained why not.¹⁹ But the explanation cannot be that Molly’s crystal-ball gazing fails to deliver a sufficiently high ratio of true beliefs. Ex hypothesi it does. So this looks like a case in which we can’t screen out an intuitively unacceptable answer to ‘How do you know?’ just on the basis of reliability. So it seems that we still lack a satisfactory answer to the question of explanation.

Sophisticated reliabilists like Goldman react to these sorts of cases by arguing that for a belief to count as knowledge it must be justified as well as caused by a reliable process. So perhaps Molly hasn’t explained how she knows that my laptop is dusty because she hasn’t pointed to anything that justifies her belief that it is dusty. Everything now depends on what it is for a belief to be justified. For Goldman a justified belief is one that is ‘obtained through the exercise of intellectual virtues’ (1992: 157). These ‘include belief formation based on sight, hearing, memory, reasoning in certain “approved” ways, and so

forth' (1992: 158). The intellectual vices include 'forming beliefs by guesswork, wishful thinking, and ignoring contrary evidence' (ibid.). So the idea would be that Molly's beliefs aren't justified because forming beliefs by crystal ball gazing is a vice. But why? When reliabilists explain their distinction between intellectual virtues and intellectual vices they do so 'by reference to reliability' (ibid.). In that case, it looks as though they ought to be prepared to add crystal ball gazing that produces a high ratio of true beliefs to our list of intellectual virtues and to view Molly's beliefs as justified as long as there is no undermining evidence.²⁰

To avoid this result one might insist that the placing of specific intellectual virtues and vices in their respective categories is based on more than just reliability. To see how this might go consider this passage:

I propose to identify the relevant intellectual virtues (at least those relevant to justification) with belief-forming capacities, faculties, or processes that would be accepted as answers to "How does X know?". In answer to questions of this form, it is common to reply "He saw it", "He heard it", "He remembers it", "He infers it from such-and-such evidence", and so forth. Thus, basing belief on seeing, hearing, memory and (good) inference are in the collection of what folk regard as intellectual virtues. Consider, for contrast, how anomalous it is to answer the question "How does X know?" with "By guess-work", "By wishful thinking", or "By ignoring contrary evidence". This indicates that these modes of belief formation – guessing, wishful thinking, ignoring contrary evidence- are standardly regarded as intellectual vices. They are not ways of obtaining knowledge, nor ways of obtaining justified belief (Goldman 1992: 162-3).

The point is this: when it comes to the classification of virtues and vices we don't start with a blank canvass and figure out from first principle whether, say, basing belief on perception is a virtue rather than a vice. Rather, we begin with a list of exemplary virtues and evaluate novel belief forming processes on the basis of how similar they are to the exemplary virtues.²¹ Basing belief on perception is an exemplary virtue, and it is true that we wouldn't be justified in regarding it as such if it didn't deliver a high ratio of true beliefs. But the ultimate basis for classifying the virtues as virtues is surely that we take them to be ways of knowing. Basing beliefs on perception is an exemplary intellectual virtue precisely because perceiving is an exemplary way of knowing. If this is right there is no hope of saying what counts as an intellectual virtue in purely non-epistemic terms. The intellectual virtues don't just deliver a high ratio of true beliefs; one can imagine crystal ball gazing doing that. The fundamental point about the intellectual virtues is that they are also, as Goldman himself acknowledges, 'ways of obtaining knowledge'.

We have now come full circle. The original question was: what makes 'by Φ -ing that P' an acceptable answer to 'How do you know that P?' if it isn't simply the fact that Φ -ing that P produces a high ratio of true beliefs? Answer: Φ -ing that P must also justify the belief that P and it wouldn't do that unless basing beliefs on Φ -ing is an intellectual virtue. But why is this mode of belief formation virtuous? Answer: because 'by Φ -ing that P' is an acceptable answer to 'How do you know?'. The circularity of this exchange starts to make minimalism look like a serious option again. Where minimalism goes wrong is in claiming that nothing useful can be said about the basis on which Φ -ing that P counts as a way of knowing that P. What now seems much more plausible, however, is that the notion of a way of knowing can't ultimately be explained in more basic terms. If this is the point of

minimalism then we should be minimalists; we could just as well call minimalism anti-reductionism, that is, anti-reductionism about ways of knowing.

Here is one way of developing this suggestion: when we judge that one explanation of S's knowledge that P is better than another we draw on our fundamental idea of what it is to know that P. Reductionism is right to this extent. But our fundamental conception of what it is to know that P is itself an explanatory conception. We conceive of knowledge as something whose possession by someone can properly be explained in some ways and not others, depending on the proposition known. So, for example, we think of S's knowledge that P as something that can properly be explained by reference to what S has perceived or remembered or proved or...., and that is why perceiving, remembering, proving, and so on all count as ways of knowing.

This relates to an idea that Snowdon mentions in the context of a discussion of the link between perceiving and knowing. The idea, which Snowdon doesn't actually endorse, is that this link explains the content of the concept of knowledge to the extent that 'our fundamental understanding of knowledge is as what is yielded by perception in certain circumstances' (1998: 301). This makes it intelligible that we treat it as unproblematic, in many cases, that someone's knowledge that P can be explained by saying that he sees that P. But this is not reductionism. Indeed, it turns reductionism on its head. Reductionism takes it that the concept of knowledge is explanatorily prior to the concept of a way of knowing, that is, that we figure out what counts as a way of knowing on the basis of a prior understanding of the concept of knowledge. What we now have is the suggestion that the content of the concept of knowledge is itself fixed by reference to the notion of a way of knowing.²²

This is close to minimalism since it makes no attempt to ground our fundamental understanding of knowledge in anything deeper. We wouldn't think that knowledge is what is yielded by perception if we didn't think that perception is reliable but we have already seen that this isn't enough to distinguish perceiving from some forms of crystal ball gazing. The connection between knowledge and perception is primitive rather than one that can be explained on the basis of an analysis of the concept of knowledge in terms of notions like reliability. Having said that, it also needs to be acknowledged that we obviously don't think of knowledge only as what is yielded by perception in certain circumstances. We also think of it as what is yielded by many other things, including testimony, reasoning, calculation, inference to the best explanation, and so on. To say that it is 'yielded' by these things is to say that one's knowledge that P can be explained by reference to such non-perceptual sources. Again, reliability has something to do with it but isn't the whole story. A better bet is to characterize knowledge directly by reference to the multiplicity of ways of knowing that can in turn be used to explain how someone knows.

Do we now have an answer to the question of explanation? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that the distinction between good and bad explanations of a person's knowledge has been shown to be grounded in an account of what it is to know. No, because the proposed account of what it is to know helps itself to the intuitive distinction between good and bad answers to the question 'How does S know?'. We can say something about what makes a good answer a good answer and what makes a bad answer a bad answer but there are limits. Beyond a certain point we have to fall back on accepted examples of good and bad answers and classify less straightforward cases by comparing them with our exemplars. If this isn't exactly minimalism then it is certainly very close to it.²³

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¹ Unger is someone who thinks that this entailment holds. See Unger 1975: 158.

² Thanks to Paul Snowdon for making this point in discussion.

³ Tim Williamson pointed this out in response to an earlier version of this paper.

⁴ Imagine that the proposition is about the distant past or something that is too small to be perceived.

⁵ The minimalist's worry about the question of explanation is that it threatens a regress. We can say that one thing X explains some other thing Y but if we ask what explains the fact X explains Y then why can't we also ask what explains the explanation of the explanatory link between X and Y?

⁶ For a defence of the view that the answer to this question is 'yes', see the chapter on other minds in Cassam 2007.

⁷ I take it that this is the point that Snowdon is making in the passage quoted above.

⁸ I'm not suggesting that this is the only route to scepticism.

⁹ See Williamson 2000: 37-8 for further discussion.

¹⁰ This is basically Dretske's view. See Dretske 1969: 129.

¹¹ See Unger 1975: 158-62.

¹² Austin 1979: 79.

¹³ This is Unger's terminology. See Unger 1975: 154.

¹⁴ He doesn't have to say this even if 'regrets' is what he calls a factive mental state operator (FMSO). 'Knows' is an FMSO but knowing that A isn't a way of knowing that A. It's not clear, in any case, whether Williamson thinks that 'regrets' is an FMSO.

¹⁵ This is Wittgenstein's view.

¹⁶ Though, for reasons that I don't have the space to go into here, I think that the explanatory conception should go for the first response.

¹⁷ Imagine that the cause is a perfectly reliable form of clairvoyance.

¹⁸ See Cassam, forthcoming, for a critical discussion of Williamson's arguments for this hypothesis.

¹⁹ Actually, it's not completely clear that the answer is unacceptable. If we are tempted to endorse it I suggest that that is because we are thinking of seeing in a crystal ball as a peculiar form of seeing.

²⁰ As Goldman asks, 'if virtues and vices are selected on the basis of reliability and unreliability, respectively, why doesn't a hypothetical case introducing a novel reliable process induce an evaluator to add that process to his list of virtues and declare the resulting belief justified?' (1992: 160). Categorical conservatism is one factor: people display a preference for entrenched categories, and 'merely imaginary cases do not exert much influence on categorial structures' (ibid.).

²¹ For a suggestion along these lines see Goldman 1992: 157-8.

²² Williamson can be read as proposing something like this, except that his conception of ways of knowing isn't the explanatory conception. See Williamson 2000: 34.

²³ Thanks to Ciara Fairley, Paul Snowdon and Tim Williamson for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.