

The Williamson-Kment tandem: naturalism and the epistemology of modality.

Long Abstract. The paper explores the prospects for a *naturalistic, counterfactual-based epistemology of modality* such as Williamson's. The conclusion is pessimistic. For all we know, the most plausible naturalistic epistemology of counterfactuals that explains the agreed, available data cannot subsume the epistemology of modality.

A naturalistic epistemology of modality. Both in (Williamson 2007) and in (Kment 2006) there are clear signs of an attempt to naturalize both modal epistemology and the practice of modalizing. Here is one of Williamson's motivating thoughts:

- (I) The capacity to handle metaphysical modality is an 'accidental' by-product of the cognitive mechanisms which provide our capacity to handle counterfactual conditionals. (p.162, my labelling)

In a three-fold argument, the paper argues not only that we have no good reason to believe (I)—i.e., not only that there is an argumentative gap—but also that there are reasons to disbelieve it—i.e., the gap might not be closable.

The Williamson-Kment tandem. Given that Williamson is much more explicitly in the business of offering an *epistemology* of modality than Kment—Kment is more in the business of offering an *ontological* analysis of necessity—the biggest part of the paper targets Williamson's account and argues directly against his epistemology of modality. One could think, however, that Kment's ontological analysis—which, *contra* Williamson, allows for false counterpossibles—could be used to rescue—and revise—Williamson's epistemology.

The three-fold argument against Williamson's epistemology. Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that these equivalences hold: (1): $\Box A \equiv (\neg A \Box \rightarrow \perp)$; and (2): $\Diamond A \equiv \neg(A \Box \rightarrow \perp)$. Let us also grant that we have non-trivial knowledge of *everyday counterfactuals*—everyday counterfactuals are assumed to have metaphysically possible antecedents. (Both are assumptions of Williamson.) **Preliminaries of the argument:** In §2, I introduce (EC)—a seemingly plausible epistemology of counterfactuals. In §3, I show that (EC) cannot serve Williamson's purposes because it over-generates possibilities—i.e., if (EC) were correct, then, if (1)-(2) hold, then, *Gold could have atomic number other than 79*. I then introduce, in §4, Williamson's epistemology, called here '(W)'. In §5, I argue that the key difference between (EC) and (W) hinges on the truth value of *counterpossibles*.

The three-fold argument: (i) in §6 I argue that (EC) and (W) are equivalent as far as the data—*everyday counterfactuals*—is concerned and that this threatens claim (I) above; (ii) (W) cannot serve Williamson's purposes either: it requires the subject to possess constitutive knowledge, which is no less problematic than modal knowledge. Further, such knowledge cannot be non-circularly accounted for in counterfactual terms; (iii) (EC) does not require constitutive knowledge and, given (i)—(EC) equally explains the data—the threat against (I) is stronger than anticipated in §6: constitutive knowledge is explanatorily superfluous and, therefore, (W) is at odds with a naturalistic counterfactual-based epistemology.

Against using Kment's (2006) to rescue Williamson: Williamson relies on (1)-(2) and this is the main reason why (EC)—which is congenial to there being false counterpossibles—does not serve Williamson's purposes. Kment's ontological analysis amounts to the denial of (1)-(2) and allows for false counterpossibles. One could think, therefore, that there is room for a counterfactual-based epistemology of modality that uses (EC) instead of (W). This is illusory. Against it, I argue that while Kment *could* (not clear that he *does*) use the naturalistic (EC) as his epistemology of counterfactuals, he cannot use (EC) as an epistemology of counterfactuals *that subsumes the epistemology of modality*. An epistemology of modality that is both *naturalistic* and *counterfactual-based* does not seem forthcoming from (Kment 2006) either.

Kment, Boris (2006), "Counterfactuals and the analysis of necessity", *Phil Perspectives*, vol. 20.

Williamson, Timothy (2007), *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Oxford Blackwell.