

Oxford Realism

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1. *Introduction.* Oxford Realism is a form of rejection of *idealism*. In the abstract, idealism combines two elements.

- (1) Individual or collective mental states directed towards facts guarantee the obtaining of those facts.
- (2) The obtaining of any fact requires that individuals are in mental states directed towards those facts.

Realism rejects (2), allowing that facts can obtain without being the objects of any mental states. *Sceptical realism* additionally rejects (1), denying that there are mental states occupancy of which guarantees the obtaining of facts towards which those states are directed. *Dogmatic realism* rejects (2) but *accepts* (1). It holds that although any fact can obtain in the absence of appropriately directed mental states, there are mental states the occupancy of which guarantees the obtaining of facts. *Oxford realism* is a form of dogmatic realism focused upon what its proponents think of as a specific kind of state of mind: the state of *knowing*. It holds, (i), that there are no facts the obtaining of which requires their being known—indeed, that knowledge *presupposes* that its factual objects can obtain without being known (Cook Wilson 1926: 802; Prichard 1909: 118)—and, (ii), that knowing is a kind of state of mind, occupancy of which state requires the obtaining of facts.

John Cook Wilson (1849–1915), Wykeham Professor of Logic at New College, Oxford, 1889–1915, instigated this tradition of response at Oxford, partly under the influence of Hermann Lotze. It was developed and transmitted, first, in works by H. A. Prichard and H. W. B. Joseph, and then later (and in more diluted form) in works by A. H. Smith, H. H. Price, Richard Robinson, Gilbert Ryle, William Kneale, Wilfrid Sellars (see e.g. Sellars 1957; Brandhoff 2019), and J. L. Austin, amongst others. Aspects of the tradition live on in more recent work that takes a *disjunctivist* (or *non-conjunctivist*) approach to knowledge or perception—for example, works by J. M. Hinton, Paul Snowdon, John McDowell, M. G. F. Martin, Timothy Williamson, and Charles Travis.

In what follows, I outline some of the basic epistemological commitments of Oxford Realism as found in the works of John Cook Wilson (1926) and H. A. Prichard (1909, 1950), focusing on some of their less orthodox commitments. (For further detail, see Dancy 2022; Passmore 1968: 240–257; Marion 2000a, 2000b, 2022; Travis and Kalderon 2013. What follows draws on, and develops, some aspects of Longworth 2017.)

2. *Knowledge as primitive.* The first and most basic commitment of Oxford Realism is that knowledge is primitive. Thus, Cook Wilson writes:

Perhaps most fallacies in the theory of knowledge are reduced to the primary one of trying to *explain* the nature of knowing or apprehending. We cannot *construct knowing*—the act of apprehending—out of any elements. I remember quite early in my philosophic reflection having an instinctive aversion to the very expression '*theory of knowledge*'. (Cook Wilson 1926: 803)

Prichard echoes:

Knowledge is *sui generis* and therefore a 'theory' of it is impossible. Knowledge is simply knowledge, and any attempt to state it in terms of something else must end in describing something which is not knowledge. (Prichard 1909: 245)

According to Cook Wilson and Prichard, knowledge is a *sui generis* kind of state, and states of knowing cannot be constructed out of elements distinct from knowledge. If the goal of a theory of knowledge is to provide a real definition of knowledge in terms of its elements, then the goal is unachievable; there can be no such theory. (For discussion, see Longworth and Wimmer 2022a, 2022b.)

3. *Knowledge as akin to proof.* That commitment is bound up with a second: knowing amounts to, or is equivalent to, possession of proof:

In knowing, we can have nothing to do with the so-called 'greater strength' of the evidence on which the opinion is grounded; simply because we know that this 'greater strength' of evidence of A's being B is compatible with A's not being B at all. (Cook Wilson 1926: 100)

The view is not that one who knows must possess a cogent derivation of what they know from premises that are distinct—and, perhaps, known. Rather, the view is that where one knows, one possesses a conclusive guarantee of that which one knows. One's standing with respect to what one knows is incompatible with falsity. Thus, meeting a threshold condition on strength of evidence could not suffice for knowing if meeting that condition were nonetheless consistent with falsity.

4. *Knowledge as a state of mind.* The third commitment of Oxford Realism is that knowing is a state of mind. We can reconstruct a path from the previous two commitments to this one as follows. If one's standing when one knows is to furnish one with a guarantee against falsity, then it must make a difference to one's subjectivity. Thus, one's standing must partly comprise a mental state. Suppose, then, that that mental state did not suffice for knowing. In that case, knowing would comprise that mental state together with whatever extra-mental elements were needed to provide a guarantee against

falsity. But in that case, knowing would be constructible out of elements. Hence, since knowing is at least partly mental, and is *not* constructible out of elements, it must be wholly mental. That is, knowing is a mental state. (See also McDowell 1982; Williamson 2000.)

5. *Knowing as distinct from believing.* Connected with the third commitment is a fourth: knowing is not a form of believing. Specifically, as mentioned, knowing is not believing whilst meeting further (non-trivial) conditions.

Holding that knowing is not a form of believing seems to be consistent with the more orthodox view that knowing nonetheless entails believing, as well as the less orthodox view that knowing does not entail, but can cohabit with, believing. In fact, Cook Wilson seems to make the stronger claim that knowing *excludes* believing:

Belief is not knowledge and the man who knows does not believe at all what he knows; he knows it. (Cook Wilson 1926: 100)

Prichard brings together the previous four commitments in a way which again echoes Cook Wilson:

Knowing and believing differ in kind as do desiring and feeling, or as do a red colour and a blue colour. (Prichard 1950: 87)

Passages such as these raise two questions: are Cook Wilson or Prichard really committed to the exclusion claim, that someone's knowing that *p* entails that they do *not* believe that *p*? And, if they are, is that claim defensible? Let's begin with the first question.

What Prichard writes suggests that he denies that knowing entails believing—since desiring is independent from feeling and being red is independent from being blue—but leaves open the possible co-instanting of knowing and believing—since, although being red (all over, &c.) might be thought to exclude being blue (all over, &c.), someone might both desire and feel.

Similarly, Cook Wilson can be read in a way that leaves open the strong exclusion claim. One way of doing so would be to read into the passage commitment to the idea that the objects of knowledge and belief differ—for example, because the objects of knowledge are facts while the objects of belief are propositions. In that case, Cook Wilson might be taken to be denying only that where someone knows something, they can believe *it*—i.e., the fact they know. For all that, one who knows that it is raining might correctly be said also to believe that it is raining, as long as we were willing to allow that “that it's raining” denotes a fact in the first case and a proposition in the second. Another way would be to read Cook Wilson as denying that any *state* of knowledge is also a state of belief, while leaving open that someone might occupy *distinct* states of both kinds.

What about defensibility? Cook Wilson and Prichard are drawn to the claim that knowing excludes believing by their positive views about the distinctive nature of believing—in particular, their

view that believing is a matter of holding something true on evidential grounds whilst recognizing that one's grounds fail to decide the issue. They thus contrast believing with other similar states like opining. The combination of that positive conception of believing with their other views about knowing makes quite natural the idea that one who knows does not also believe.

By contrast, many contemporary thinkers are willing to adopt a more minimal conception of believing, or to accept the existence of a more general kind of state of mind that encompasses believing. For example, they accept a conception on which believing, or some more general sort of state of mind, is a matter of holding something true, perhaps in a way that is potentially responsive to evidence. In that case, since knowing is a way of holding something true, one would expect knowing to entail, rather than exclude, believing. I can see no grounds for thinking that Cook Wilson or Prichard would have denied that knowing was, or at least entailed occupancy of, a state of mind of that more general sort.

What they would have denied, however, is that that more general kind of state of mind is a *fundamental* kind of state of mind, a kind of state one could be in without being in some more basic state of mind. They would view that general kind of state as instanced disjunctively: one is in that state only because one is in some more specific state—for example, because one knows or believes or opines, &c. (For discussion of the exclusion claim, see Urmson 1988; Longworth and Wimmer 2022b.)

6. *The Accretion*. The fifth commitment of Oxford Realism concerns our capacities to know which states of mind we occupy. Cook Wilson presents the commitment in the following passage:

[knowledge cannot be one of] two states of mind...the correct and the erroneous one...quite indistinguishable to the man himself. [For] as the man does not know in the erroneous state of mind, neither can he know in the other state (Cook Wilson 1926: 107)

The first thought contained here is that subjects must be able to distinguish any state of knowledge from other “erroneous” states of mind, at least in principle. The second is that if a state were not in the required sense distinguishable by its subject from “erroneous” states, then—since those other states are, by assumption, not states of knowledge—that state could not be a state of knowledge. The seemingly implausible strength of this commitment, together with its seeming independence from other commitments, has led Charles Travis to label it *the Accretion*. (Travis 2005; Travis and Kalderon 2013.)

Cook Wilson's view may have been sponsored by an argument like the following. For a state to be a case of knowledge it must be different in kind from any “erroneous” state. Furthermore—and, perhaps, because the kinds in question are mental kinds—the required difference must have a subjective reflection: it must make a difference to how things are from the subject's perspective. If the difference between the target state and its “erroneous” ringers were

blankly external to the way things are from the subject's perspective, then how things were subjectively for the subject of either kind of state would be compatible with their not knowing. And in that case, they wouldn't be in the subjective position of one who knows. A final step in the argument would need to connect the requirement that the difference between knowing and its ringers be reflected subjectively with the further demand that the subject be able to distinguish the two states.

What, more precisely, does Cook Wilson mean by claiming that subjects must be able to distinguish states of knowing from ringers? Prichard offers the following elaboration:

We must recognize that when we know something we either do, or by reflecting can, know that our condition is one of knowing that thing, while when we believe something, we either do or can know that our condition is one of believing and not of knowing: so that we cannot mistake belief for knowledge or vice versa. (Prichard 1950: 88)

Prichard's elaboration of the Accretion invokes two conditions on knowing:

- (i) If one knows p , then one can know by reflection that one knows p .
- (ii) If one believes p without knowing p , then one can know by reflection that one believes p without knowing p .

Condition (i) does not obviously entail condition (ii). It is consistent to hold that one might fail to know p whilst being unable to know by reflection that one failed to know p even if one also held that if one knew p , then one would be able to know that one knew p . To take one sort of example, one might reasonably hold that a severely drunk person can be unable to know that they are drunk (and can even believe that they are sober) whilst at the same time being precluded by their drunkenness from knowing that they don't know that they are drunk. That would seem perfectly consistent with also holding that someone who is sober can know that they are, and might be in a position to know that they know that. (See Williams 1978: 309–313; Soteriou 2016: 117–156.)

Furthermore, meeting condition (i) would be enough to enable knowers to distinguish their state from ringers. On at least one reasonable understanding, one can distinguish an F from G s just in case one can activate knowledge that the F is not one of the G s. Similarly, one can distinguish a G from F s just in case one can activate knowledge that the G is not one of the F s. Thus, distinguishability is asymmetrical. Very often the required capacities run in step. However, in the sorts of cases we've just considered, the capacities can come apart: one can activate knowledge that a case of one's sobriety isn't a case of one's severe drunkenness, even though one cannot activate knowledge that a case of one's severe drunkenness isn't a case of one's sobriety. One can distinguish one's knowing from one's occupying ringer states if one can activate knowledge that one's state is not a ringer state. And

that can be so even if one cannot distinguish one's occupying a ringer state from one's knowing. Cook Wilson's requirement that knowing be distinguishable by its subjects from ignorance can be implemented by condition (i) alone.

Even if we treat the Accretion as incorporating only condition (i), it is apt to seem implausibly demanding. For according to condition (i), that one knows is, in Timothy Williamson's sense, a *luminous* condition: for every case α , if in α one knows, then in α one is able to know that one knows. And Williamson has offered powerful arguments that no condition which obtains only sometimes—including the condition that one knows—is luminous. (Williamson 2000: 93–123)

7. *Being under an impression.* The Accretion presents Oxford Realism with a difficulty. Given the luminosity of one's epistemic position, how is it possible for one to make mistakes? More carefully, how is it possible for one to make mistakes that one cannot, by reflection, correct? Cook Wilson offers the following example:

...we see at a little distance a person whom 'we mistake for an acquaintance' and without hesitation perform some act which it would be a liberty to take with anyone but an acquaintance, do something in fact which we rightly say we should not have done if we had ever suspected he was not an acquaintance. We did not act on an opinion that it was our friend; for, in forming an opinion, we are aware that the evidence is insufficient and, if we had thought *that*, we should never have done the act. It seems more like belief; but if we had consciously made it a matter of belief, we should have distinguished it from knowledge, and then again, *ex hypothesi*, we should not have done the act. Probably one answer offered would be that, though we didn't know, we thought we knew. But this will not suffice. Apart from the criticism we have already passed on this phrase itself, if we really thought we knew, we must have reflected and must have thought the evidence conclusive, whereas, *ex hypothesi*, any reflection shows it could not be conclusive. (Cook Wilson 1926: 109–10)

If our troubling performance is not explained by knowledge, belief, or opinion, then what does explain it? Cook Wilson proposes to explain it by appeal to our state of *being under an impression*. This state, like belief or knowledge—is a mode of holding something to be true. However, unlike belief or opinion, being under an impression need not be installed or sustained by reflection. Indeed, unlike knowledge, being under an impression is incompatible with, and so would be destroyed by, reflection. (Cook Wilson 1926: 108–113)

Being under an impression falls outside the scope of the Accretion. One cannot know by reflection that one is under an impression since reflection would release one from its hold. However, it is natural to think that some mistakes can withstand reflection. If one were the subject of a standard sceptical scenario, then one might be subject to mistakes both about how things

were—e.g. that one had hands—and about one’s attitudes to how things were—e.g. that one knew that one had hands. And it is natural to think that no amount of reflection would help.

There are two complementary routes via which an attempt might be made to deal with the threat of reflective errors. The first would be to deny that reflective errors are possible. Competent reflection reveals that one does not really know facts that obtain only outside sceptical scenarios, and thereby enables us to avoid erroneous commitments. The second would seek to treat sceptical scenarios as barriers to reflection. In certain circumstances, competent reflection is blocked—for example, in cases of severe drunkenness. Similarly, perhaps, being the subject of a sceptical scenario might prevent the competent reflection needed to reveal one’s plight.

That completes my sketch of six core commitments of Oxford Realism: (1) knowledge is primitive; (2) knowledge is akin to proof; (3) knowledge is a state of mind; (4) knowledge is distinct from belief; (5) the Accretion; (6) mistakes depend upon the unreflective state of being under the impression. (See also Marion 2000a, 2000b; Travis 2005; Travis and Kalderon 2013.)

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