Knowledge and Freedom of Mind

(A mix of notes and text)

1. In Scepticism (1990) and a paper called ‘Scepticism and autonomy’ published the previous year, I defended an approach to the topic with the following features:
   a) Sceptical challenges not best viewed, not as raising issues about what we know, or about what claims to knowledge we can legitimately make.
   b) Rather, the challenge our ability to carry out inquiries or deliberations in ways that …
      i. … display responsible self-control of the activity in question.
      ii. … manifest our capacity for autonomous conduct in the realm of inquiry.
      iii. … permit us to own, or endorse, our methods and cognitive activities.
   c) In that case, I argued, we should look on the concept of knowledge as something that is important, but this importance is secondary. It is a tool that we use as a means to exercising the kind of autonomous self control described above. We use this concept to identify informants, or as a way of identifying when, for example, we should trust our own memories or observations, and so on. In that case, the value of knowledge is instrumental: it is valuable because of the uses we can make of it, for example (cf Williamson) as evidence.
   d) In consequence of this, I argued that the problem of scepticism might even be viewed as a special case of the free will problem, and I claimed that we should treat some versions of externalism as analogous to (or versions of) compatibilist account of freedom.
   e) And I presented this framework as the best context in which to formulate a form of virtue epistemology which shows the influence of the pragmatist tradition.
   f) My aim in this paper is to work out a bit more of what this notion of autonomy might involve: this will involve talking in general terms about freedom of mind and asking whether there are dimensions of freedom of mind which do not consist in freedom of agency.
   g) And to place the concept of knowledge closer to the centre of the stage than I previously did by linking the concept of freedom of mind to some of the ideas that are used in analyses of knowledge.

2. Impediments to freedom of belief: examples
   a) Suppose someone is obsessively convinced that, say, she is being deceived by her partner or that she has been abducted by aliens. In this case, the believer will either be unable to regard some questions about his beliefs states as raising questions for further inquiry. He cannot take seriously the possibility that this belief may be mistaken; or he cannot take seriously the possibility that there are questions that need to be addressed about the adequacy of the evidence he has to support this certainty. This is an impediment to intellectual freedom because he is not sensitive to normative standards (or not moved to act in accordance with such standards) when it is appropriate for him to do so.
   b) A second form of obsessive belief formation is complementary to this. The agent is obsessively aware of the issues that need to be addressed but unable to recognize
when he reaches a stage in his inquiries where the questions should no longer arise. The inquiry is never allowed to stop. What these cases have in common is that the agent is unable to make sound, action guiding judgements about when the issues are relevant to his goals, epistemic or non-epistemic.

c) Another example is suggested by Miranda Fricker’s work on epistemic injustice (2007). Fricker is concerned with what she calls ‘testimonial injustice’, cases where someone’s ability to provide information to others is damaged by a perceived lack of credibility, especially cases where the lack of credibility originates in the fact that others are reluctant to take their testimony seriously because of distorting stereotypes attached to the agent’s identity, for example their race or gender. When this becomes internalized, and the agent comes to see him or herself as lacking credibility, this deeply limits what the agent can do or think. It limited their freedom of mind. Testimony is not the only area in which this kind of thing arises: someone may be prevented from participating in collaborative inquiry or deliberation through a habitual lack of confidence in their ability to contribute by asking relevant questions or by recognizing when questions are not relevant or need not be asked.

d) One more example of the phenomena of freedom of mind can be identified, even if, in this case, we do not do so through identifying what is evidently an impediment to freedom of mind. : we may compare two scientists, both excellently trained and well qualified to evaluate experiments, arguments and completed research projects. One of them possesses some invaluable capacities which the other lacks (or possesses to a lesser degree). These are capacities to have new, surprising ideas, to sketch new hypotheses or show remarkable imagination in suggesting new techniques. It is not the case that the less imaginative one fails to confirm to appropriate normative standards; these capacities are not ones we can be trained to have. Their greater freedom of mind consists in a flexibility of imagination and creativity: there are things they can do that their fellows cannot do; and they can use these abilities in ways that contribute to their success. It may be wrong to describe the lack of these capacities as an impediment to freedom of mind, although it is clear that possessing them does contribute to it.

Impediments to our ability to inquire effectively are of two kinds.

a) Some reflect what we might call our intellectual or cognitive character, the capacities we exercise when we evaluate beliefs, carry out problems, try to answer questions or solve problems. The examples of obsessive behaviour illustrate this. It need not follow that we are automatically responsible for (or blameworthy for) unfortunate consequences of such traits, but it often will. The examples about imagination illustrate this – we cannot be blamed for our lack of ingenuity in coming up with new ideas. Let us call these ‘internal’ impediments.

b) External impediments arise when we wrongly trust unreliable sources of information where our doing so does not result from the exercise of capacities which function as internal impediments. (Some cases may be hard to classify here – for example ignorance or false beliefs due to our teachers or our training etc.) I think we should treat all these phenomena as impediments to freedom because they impose limits on what we can do. However the difference between them is important, and I propose that we distinguish ‘freedom of mind’ which involves a lack of internal impediments and ‘freedom of inquiry’ which also requires a lack of external impediments.
3. Autonomous inquiry

As mentioned above, these kinds of impediment to freedom of mind may be explicable in terms of the agency that is involved in inquiry. It will be useful to give a brief description of what the activity of inquiry involves.

Inquiry typically begins with an articulation of its goal, perhaps in the form of a question indicating what it is that we want to find out. What other components will it have? For a start: we may make observations and draw inferences; we access information from our memories; perhaps we carry out experiments or engage in thought experiments; we may engage in cooperative discussions with other people. Some of these are things that we *do*, things with respect to which we are active: observation involves looking as well as seeing; and bringing what I see under concepts is sometimes thought of as an expression of the active side of our nature. Experiments involve actions and thought experiments require the active imagining of actions; discussion involves challenging and responding to the challenges of other people.

In carrying out these activities, we need to make evaluations, many of them reflective. As well thinking about which strategies are good ones and evaluating whether something is a good answer to our question, we shall reflect upon how good our evidence is for some proposition, whether an argument is valid or an inference trustworthy, whether an observation is relevant to the assessment of some proposition, and whether we have taken account of all relevant lines of inquiry. This list only samples the range of evaluations that may be necessary. Unless we can carry out such evaluations (and be confident of our ability to do so) our attempts to inquire well will either yield unreliable results or will stall.

We have identified inquiry as an attempt to answer a question. The sort of normative regulation of inquiry described here will involve raising further questions about the progress of our inquiry: should I have considered other possibilities?; should I have checked my reasoning or repeated my experiments; and so on. We can persevere with our inquiries only if we are confident that we will ask the *right* subordinate questions, that our reflection will take appropriate routes. So, one important aspect of inquiry is the asking of further questions. These involve questions about how the inquiry is progressing and also questions whose answers will be relevant to making further progress with our initial investigation. So when we describe the logical structure of an inquiry, one thing we can do is show that it involves a (possibly very complex) structure of questions, many of them subordinate to others in different ways. Complex activities are composed of less complex ones; and inquiries are composed of ‘sub-inquiries’. Not only are inquiries directed at answering questions, but, also, they are regulated by asking questions. And these involve questions about the inquiry and also questions whose answers are relevant to the inquiry.

One of the most important normative issues about the regulation of inquiry, then, will concern which subordinate questions we should ask. Inquiry would be impossible if we had to address every possible subordinate question and answer it. Things would be no better if we had to consider every possible question and ask whether we need to answer it if our inquiry is to prosper. Many familiar sceptical arguments exploit these alarming possibilities: for any assumption we rely on, we must be ask what our reason is for accepting it; and then we must ask the same question about the beliefs we rely upon in answering the first; and perhaps we must then ask why these considerations are reasons for what we take them to be reasons for; and so on.
In practice, subordinate questions ‘occur’ to us as relevant. This clearly has a passive character and reflects our character and education; the form it takes reflects the influence of the sorts of habits and capacities we can describe as virtues and vices. As Aristotle would say, these judgments reflect our ‘second nature’, habits of evaluation and reflection that keep us on track. (Ref – McDowell) The evaluations are often automatic. Moreover what is often called ‘judgment’ is usually involved in determining which questions occur to us as relevant: this occurs against the background of widespread knowledge and experience at making similar kinds of assessments; and it depends upon our good sense in assessing this significance of all this information rather than upon the application of mechanical rules. The appropriateness of a question is always a function of one’s whole cognitive position in the particular case with which we are involved. Success in inquiry thus depends upon the wisdom embodied in our judgments and upon the cognitive habits and skills we have acquired through education, experience and training. Success depends upon our epistemic ‘character’. How observant I am will influence whether relevant evidence grabs my attention; and how intellectually honest I am will influence whether I generally come to doubt propositions once presented with sufficient counter-evidence to them.

We can use this framework to make sense of the examples presented in the previous section.

a) In both cases, the obsessive irrationality which appears to be an impediment to freedom mind interferes with our ability to judge when a subordinate question is, or is not relevant to the success of the inquiry. Such impediments to freedom limit our ability to track what actions (and inactions) are required of us.

b) The effects of prejudice are similar: when someone fails to give due weight to the testimony of someone who is black or a woman, then they are prevented from seeing the relevance of questions which should be raised (or insist on raising questions which are not relevant to the current inquiry.)

c) A disposition to foolishness is an impediment to freedom of mind for similar reasons, as are weaknesses like epistemic akrasia. (Hookway 2001). Consider a devoted parent whose loyalty and love allows them to maintain their confidence in their son’s innocence of a crime of which he has been accused while acknowledging, whenever they are forced to face up to the evidence against him, that their standards of epistemic evaluation would really require them to take a different view.

4. Relevance and Rationality

In setting out these views, I have used a notion of relevance without explaining exactly what this involves. One way to develop this idea is to emphasis the link between freedom and reason: the impediments to freedom that I have described may all be impediments to rationality. Freedom of mind would then consist in an ability to be sensitive to the demands of rationality – either the rationality of belief or the rationality of strategies and techniques of inquiry. This is only part of the story, but I shall use it to explore something of what is required for freedom in belief and in other aspects of the mind.

One version of this view can be found in the work of Daniel Dennett (1984: 139-44). Applied to freedom of action, his view holds that an agent could have done otherwise when they are a properly functioning agent who can modify their future actions in the light of feedback, training or correction. If we apply this idea to the
freedom of belief, for example, we arrive at a view that relates this concept to the
capacity that an agent has to revise beliefs, or form beliefs better in future, in the light
of instruction, training or feedback. Such an agent is ‘cognitively tunable’ so that they
act differently in similar circumstances in future. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith have
criticized Dennett’s view (1996), observing that someone could have the ability to
confirm to these norms as a result of ‘sub-personal’ or largely mechanical processes.
The manifestations of freedom of mind seem to be things we do, while Dennett’s
view would allow that this may be something that happens to us. We can imagine
cases where something occurs that the agent might describe as being forced to reason
and act rationally, using standards that they would neither willingly endorse nor
identify with.

A more plausible view would contain a requirement that freedom of belief
involves an ability to recognize the force of norms, not just a disposition to conform
to them or adapt so that one does conform to them. This is defended in a particularly
clear form by Pettit and Smith, and is neatly expressed by claims such as: ‘To hold a
belief or desire freely is to hold it in the presence of an ability, should the belief or
desire be wrong, to get it right. (445). Agents who have this capacity to belief or
desire responsibly are described as ‘orthonomous’. This property has two
components:

i) The orthonomous agent recognizes and acknowledges the normative
constraints governing beliefs and desires.

ii) The orthonomous agent is capable of responding appropriately to these
constraints.

Although their paper is mostly concerned with beliefs and desires, it is evident that
they see this as the fundamental character of freedom of mind in general and thus also
of freedom of the will. It should also be applicable to states such as emotions: the
orthonomous agent can evaluate and, presumably, regulate emotions in accord with an
understanding of when they are appropriate. It is not required that they always will
adjust attitudes when they recognize that they are inappropriate. Moreover this
account of the orthonomous agent captures an ideal type: few agents are probably
always capable of regulating all their attitudes in line with relevant norms; and the
freedom even of particular beliefs or desires may be a complex matter. But we can
take this as indicating the sorts of factors that are relevant to judgements about
freedom of mind.

Whether it captures everything that is relevant to this is a matter for
discussion. There are factors that may contribute to freedom of mind other than things
that function as constraints. Appeal to normative constraints may be appropriate when
we consider a case where someone’s belief is based on evidence forms a belief on the
basis of evidence and we are concerned with their ability to weigh evidence
appropriately. But even in this case, freedom of belief formation may depend upon,
for example, exercises of imagination which are not obviously subject to constraints.
Someone can be blinkered through an inability to think of possible sources of further
evidence or counter-evidence when evaluating their beliefs, or deciding what to
believe. This may be due to carelessness or to simple lack of a sufficiently flexible
imagination. Even if they think to ask the relevant question ‘Are there other sources
of evidence that I should have investigated?’ they may lack cognitive capacities that
are required for answering it effectively. This can led to a false confidence in
mistaken opinions, and they may not be well placed to recognize the relevance of
additional considerations unless these are drawn to their attention by someone more
imaginative that they are.
Pettit and Smith develop their view with the aid of the concept of a ‘conversational stance’, a sort of discussion or conversation concerned with some matter of fact. When we engage in such a conversation, we make assumption about, for example, our authority about the content of our own beliefs, and about our ability to recognize that we are responding to the same problems or questions, and we rely upon shared normative standards that determine what sort of evidence or argument provides support for particular beliefs. The strategy is then to study what is involved in participating in such a conversation, challenging and defending beliefs, and understand freedom of belief as involving a potential interiorisation of this process. The responsible believer is ‘self-starting’ having no need of conversational partners to alert us to force us to recognize the impact of norms upon our opinions. Using conversation as a model for deliberation is thus in harmony with the sort of inquiry based approach which I described above.

The view defended by Pettit and Smith requires that the free believer recognizes the force of normative constraints. In the remainder of this section, I shall consider some problems with this idea that have been pointed out by Josefa Toribio in her paper ‘Free Belief’ (2003), and look at how she thinks we should solve these problems. In the following section I argue that this solution is not wholly successful and try to identify the kind of supplementation that is required.

Toribio is concerned about Pettit and Smith’s account of how we recognize the relevant norms. She points out that they treat this awareness as of a dispositional character (2003: 331). It is compatible with the dispositional view that sometimes we can be prevented from acting in accord with them by, for example, inattentiveness, forgetfulness, or passion. When engaging in discussion with someone, they may help us to overcome these difficulties and be helped to recognize the normative constraints that we are subject to. But the case that interests Toribio is one in which there is no interlocutor to help us out. Freedom of mind appears to require an ability, in principle, to overcome such obstacles to effective deliberation or belief formation. How can this be understood? She continues:

[When] the individual is her own interlocutor, she needs to be able to spot those situations in which she ought to engage in critical reflection … . Since we cannot be constantly questioning our thoughts and beliefs, and since spotting when we should do so cannot, on pain of infinite regress, be a matter of actively entertaining or understanding additional inferential principles, we are forced to invoke some kind of automatic sub-personal component. Thus Pettit and Smith’s self-contained model of cognitive vigilance must be rejected. (2003: 332-333)

Toribio’s diagnosis is ‘we must also possess a specific kind of know-how or skill, namely the ability to automatically recognize a situation as one requiring critical appraisal.

She calls this ‘component of believing responsibly’ ‘critical pop-out’ and, as well as operating automatically, it ‘belongs squarely to the sub-personal level’. Moreover she insists that this ability is necessary for free belief and not merely an enabling condition for it. The need for some sort of automatic recognition that questions arise was acknowledge in the section on inquiry above (and see Hookway (several papers). My aim in this paper is argue that simply introducing a notion like ‘critical pop-out’ is not enough, and to suggest that we need a more holistic conception of freedom.

5. Automatic responses and trust
One of the cases of obsessive belief that we described above contains something very similar to 'critical pop-out'. Questions automatically present themselves, returning to intrude upon our thought even after their irrelevance has been carefully demonstrated. The fact that irrelevant questions occur to us is evidently an obstacle to the obsessive’s freedom of mind. Presumably Toribio would add the externalist condition that these questions automatically occur to us only when it is rational for us to take them seriously. But it seems that this is not reflected at all in the phenomenology of their arrival.

The phenomenological character of our use of what comes automatically can be of several different kinds, and this can give rise to some different kinds of alienation from our cognitive operations. Consider two obsessives who have received a detailed explanation of the error of their delusion. A critical question constantly, and automatically, impresses itself upon their attention. But they also recall the apparently cogent explanation of why these questions should not be taken seriously. One obsessive, will simply find themselves unable to take seriously the apparently cogent explanation and will trust their automatic questioning; and this may even shake their confidence in rational explanations in general. Another engages in a constant battle with the automatic responses endeavouring to do what they believe to be the right thing – while not feeling that the action is truly theirs. If Toribio’s critical pop-up is to contribute to freedom of mind, then the individual must openly trust it and welcome the facts of so acting as her own action. Freedom of mind depends upon a kind of self-trust (For a general discussion, see Lehrer, 1997).

Other examples can be used to raise similar issues. Spontaneous self-trust is lacking in spite of the fact that the agent is deliberately acting rationally. It is well known that people are generally poor at probabilistic reasoning: the judgments that seem right and natural are demonstrably flawed; and when we consult the textbooks in deciding how to believe, or take the advice of an expert, we find ourselves forming beliefs, or making decisions, from which we are alienated. The phenomenology of the case is that we endorse a proposition, on the advice of someone else, with no confidence at all in the judgments we would ourselves make on the case. Even if we know that the judgment is right, it does not feel right. One explanation of what goes wrong here may be that we do not understand why this is the correct thing to believe (or do). And if we had arrived at another mistaken belief, we may well have felt that we did understanding why our belief was correct. We may also be confident that if we have to solve a similar problem, we would either have to rely essentially upon expert testimony or upon painstakingly employing a heuristic or technique which would appear to be unnatural. It seems evident that an adequate account of freedom of mind should explain why it is lacking in this case. When we painstakingly apply the heuristic or formal technique, we responsibly do something that we know will take us to the right answer, but something important is missing.

These examples identify several ways in which freedom of mind can be impeded.

- There are cases where we are incapable of exercising a distinctive kind of self-control and contributing a distinctive kind of self-trust in solving problems and forming beliefs.
- This may occur when we painstakingly rely upon a heuristic or method for solving a problem while (1) not understanding how or why it works, or (2) while not confident in our understanding of how or why it works, or (3) while not confident in our ability to deploy our understanding of how or why it works in other cases.
• It can also occur in cases where inference or belief formation, or the raising of questions (etc) is *automatic*, yet not something that we can confidently trust or endorse.

• There may be cases where we use a method or heuristic to solve a problem that we are confident of without understanding why or how it works. In some such cases, we possess confident self-trust in or mastery of the technique; and in other cases, we do not.

6. Knowledge: a conjecture

My conjecture is that Gettier examples, cases that meet otherwise attractive criteria for knowledge which we cannot recognize as cases of real knowledge, all involve impediments to freedom of mind.

Consider Goldman’s fake barn example: the agent uses his recognitional capacities in order to identify what he sees and concludes that it is a barn. The belief is true and, basing it on experience, he has reason to accept it. But he is driving through a valley where most things that look like barns are, in fact, barn facades. In that case, in context, he lacks the ability to answer questions about whether something is a barn, in the kind of context in which he finds himself, in spite of the fact that he thinks he can. Indeed, he is not disposed to ask the questions that he *ought* to ask. Thus there is an external impediment to his freedom of mind.

Moreover, it might be argued that features that are, as a response to Gettier cases, identified as necessary for knowledge may be better understood if we try to relate them to phenomena concerned with freedom of mind. One example is the concept of epistemic luck: Duncan Pritchard has developed this idea in detail: if we form a belief which is true, but, in this case, it is a matter of luck that our belief is true, then it does not count as knowledge. Pritchard defines luck with respect to a particular event of belief formation: we avoid luck if our beliefs are formed in ways that are *safe* and *sensitive*.

We can avoid this sort of luck even if it is not the case that our belief formation does not manifest (or contribute to) our freedom of mind. In context – indeed, in many contexts, our beliefs are formed in ways that are both safe and sensitive. We are safe from the risk of falsity, and we are unlikely to miss out on important truths. What could be missing?

a) The capacities we have that enable us to avoid being unlucky by ensuring that we are lucky, operate within limited contexts and with beliefs of a distinctive and limited subject matter. Perhaps a limited range of inquiries can be carried out without impediment, but there is no provision that the capacities employed ensure a broader range of cognitive capacities can be performed. If the agent believes she is capable of a range of cognitive achievements, this is because of evidence she has about a limited range of inquiries.

b) She need not have a sense of ownership of her cognitive achievements. There is no confident self-trust supporting her use of cognitive capacities, no assurance that impediments might always emerge that disrupt her inquiries. (cf Greco: she *may* be confident of *particular methods*, but she is not confident of *her* reliability.) She is not confident that, if something goes wrong, she is likely to have the ability to put things right again.

7. Freedom of mind: a conclusion
Some have argued that the value of knowledge consists in the fact that somehow the agent deserves credit for knowing these things: the beliefs have been formed in ways that reflect well upon the agent. Well, maybe. Initially this seems unsatisfactory: it is odd that the value of knowledge should lie in the past rather than in the future. We seem to be invited to sit back and admire what the agent has done, but only because of how the agent has done it. When Tim Williamson suggests that our knowledge is what can be used as evidence, he seems to get things the right way round. Even if the value of knowledge is not simply instrumental, it surely consists in what knowledge gives us rather than what it shows about our past achievements. The use of ‘credit’ risks failing to take these observations sufficiently seriously.

I want to suggest that the use of the concept of freedom of mind offers a way of getting round these difficulties.

a) Freedom of mind (etc) is an intrinsic good, something we can value for its own case.

b) One reason for taking freedom of mind seriously (freedom of belief, desires etc) is that freedom of belief and desire is a necessary condition for freedom of action.

c) When we make claims to knowledge, we claim to be exhibiting freedom of mind in accepting the proposition in question.

d) Thus: when we value the role of freedom of mind in our past achievements, we recognize those achievements as contributing to the good of freedom of mind in our future activities.

e) Thus an important part of the value of knowledge can be traced to the value that attaches to freedom of mind. The knowledge manifests freedom of mind and thus contributes to free agency and inquiry in the future.