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Epistemological Analysis of the Tripartite Account of Knowledge as Justified True Belief

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Abstract

Philosophers have dedicated themselves to finding an indubitable definition of knowledge for many years. The fundamental epistemological question that epistemologists have grappled with is: 'What is knowledge, and how does it differ from belief or opinion?' This question has elicited various responses from philosophers. The well-known classical, traditional, and tripartite account of knowledge describes it as 'justified true belief', also known as the JTB account. While many philosophers seem comfortable with the JTB account, some object to this definition by arguing that justified true belief does not constitute knowledge. In this paper, I argue that the tripartite account of knowledge as a justified true belief is overly simplistic. I maintain that the individual components of the JTB account are necessary but not sufficient for defining knowledge. There are significant and plausible counterarguments demonstrating that the JTB account is inadequate and needs to be strengthened to serve as a robust definition of knowledge. I contend that the Gettier cases present a compelling challenge to viewing knowledge solely as justified true belief, necessitating the addition of further clauses to the tripartite framework to enhance its strength. Finally, I explore the implications of my argument and stance regarding justification and knowledge, particularly considering the possibility of scepticism in our everyday lives.

Keywords

Epistemology, knowledge, tripartite, justified true belief, Gettier

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Introduction

The overarching aim of this paper is to provide an epistemological analysis of the tripartite account of knowledge as justified true belief and to explore whether the tripartite account offers a sufficient description of knowledge. I shall begin by giving a brief background on the claim that knowledge is a justified true belief (JTB). Then, I shall summarise Gettier's counterexamples, which show that justification is subject to defeat or undermining. The counterexamples point to the fact that the traditional claim of knowledge as a justified true belief is not a sufficient condition for knowledge. Next, I will discuss some of the arguments of some contemporary epistemologists who have attempted to respond to the Gettier problem. Subsequently, I will make an overall evaluation and affirm my position.

Tripartite Analysis of Knowledge

Etymologically, the term 'epistemology' is derived from two Greek words: *episteme*, meaning knowledge, and *logos*, meaning study. Therefore, in its most general sense, epistemology refers to that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the study of the nature and sources of human knowledge. The basic epistemological questions include: What is knowledge, and how is it different from belief or opinion? What is truth, and how can one conclude that a statement is true? How do we know, or what are the sources of knowledge? The question, "What is knowledge?" evokes numerous analyses of knowing formulated by various philosophers.

For many years, most epistemologists had endorsed justified true belief as an adequate analysis of knowledge. Plato maintains that one knows something when one has a belief that is true and one is in a position to justify it (Syed & Shuja, 2018). In *Theaetetus*, Plato (1961) offers a detailed discussion of what knowledge is. The three key characters in this discussion are Socrates, Thaetetus, and Thaetetus's teacher, Theodorus. In this dialogue, three definitions of knowledge are analysed, plus an extra one that Socrates refutes as not being a proper account of knowledge. The three proposed definitions, that is, (i) knowledge is perception; (ii) knowledge is true judgement; and (iii) knowledge is true judgement with an account, are all rejected systematically by Socrates, and no alternative account of knowledge is given. Instead, the dialogue discovers three things that do not constitute knowledge: perception, true judgement, and true judgement with an account (Chappell, 2023). So, like most other Platonic dialogues, the *Theaetetus* ends in an impasse; it is aporetic.

Several philosophers have tried to state the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge. Traditionally, most philosophers considered justified true belief as an adequate analysis of knowledge. According to Graham (1981), there is objective knowledge if there is a body of propositions which are true and which it is rational to believe. This account of knowledge is referred to as the 'traditional', 'classical' or 'tripartite' analysis of knowledge (de Grefte, 2023). According to John Pollock (1986), the justified true belief account of knowledge shows that the meaning of sentences can be provided under a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. For example, let us consider the proposition "Simon knows that the President is around". We can designate the subject - 'Simon' as 'S' and the predicate - 'President is around' as 'P'. Then, according to justified true belief analysis of knowledge, the proposition "Simon knows that the President is around" is an instance of knowledge if and only if:

- i. S believes that P is true
- ii. P is true and
- iii. S is evidentially justified in believing that P is true (Pollock, 1986).

So, the proposition "Simon knows that the president is around" is an instance of knowledge if and only if: Simon believes that the president is around; indeed, the president is around; and Simon is justified in believing that the president is around. Therefore, the conclusion of justified true belief is that S knows that P if S has justified true belief that P. According to the above argument, there are three conditions for defining knowledge: (a) belief, (b) truth (c) justification. A justifiable true belief ought to be based on evidence that would not easily produce false beliefs (de Grefte, 2018). However, the question that lingers is whether the tripartite conditions are sufficient to define knowledge.

Is Knowledge a Justified True Belief?

Contemporary epistemologists started looking afresh at the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief when Edmund Gettier (1963) published his paper, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* I shall examine Gettier's objection to the justified true belief notion of knowledge and evaluate whether he succeeded in showing that one can

have justified true belief, which is not knowledge. I shall argue that Gettier succeeded in showing that one can have justified true belief, which is not knowledge. He showed that there are cases of justified true belief that are not instances of knowledge. And so, his counterexamples illustrate that justification is subject to defeat or undermining, while truth, understood as a fundamental object of knowledge, is not. Accordingly, Gettier showed that justified, true belief is not a sufficient condition for knowledge.

In his paper, Gettier asserts that justified true belief (also called the traditional or tripartite analysis of knowledge) is not knowledge (Gettier, 1963). He gave counterexamples to show that there are cases of justified true belief that are not cases of knowledge. Gettier, therefore, contends that the justified true belief account of knowledge is not sufficient and that an alternative and correct analysis is needed to explain what we may call knowledge. His paper suggests that we need to go beyond justification to rightly assert that we know something. To demonstrate that justified true belief is not a sufficient account for knowledge, Gettier supplies us with counterexamples, which he calls *Case I* and *Case II*, respectively. In the two cases, Gettier demonstrates that justification is preserved through entailment. The term entailment refers to the relationship between one proposition and another that is a logically necessary consequence of it.

In *Case I*, Gettier (1963) shows the possibility of a false belief, but with good/justified reasons for such a belief. *Case I* is as follows: Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. Smith evidentially believes that Jones will get the job, say, because the manager assured him. Moreover, Smith evidentially believes that Jones has ten coins in his pocket, as he (Smith) counted the coins in Jones's pocket a few minutes before. With these two forms of justified belief, Smith infers that "the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket". Now imagine that, unknown to Smith, he has ten coins in his pocket, and that he got the job, not Jones. It follows that the proposition "the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" is perfectly true, though it was inferred from the false proposition "Jones will get the job". So, we cannot grant that Smith knew that "the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket." In this case, the proposition "the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" is not an instance of knowledge (Gettier, 1963; Moser, Mulder & Trout, 1997).

Likewise, *Case II* can be paraphrased as follows. Smith believes falsely that "Jones owns a Ford", - say, based on the testimony of a reliable friend. Based on "Jones owns a Ford", Smith infers that "either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona". Then it happens that Brown is in Barcelona. So, the proposition "either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona" is true. Accordingly, Smith is justified in believing that "either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona", but for sure Smith does not know that "either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona" (Gettier, 1963, pp. 232-233; Moser, Mulder & Trout, 1997, p. 96).

The above two cases demonstrate that "the justified true belief" arises from entailment of 'justified false belief', meaning Jones will get the job and owns a Ford in cases I and II, respectively. With these counterexamples, Gettier suggests that the traditional three conditions for knowledge—belief, truth, and justification—are individually necessary but require supplementing, as justified true belief alone is not enough for knowledge (Dancy, 1985). Initially, analytical philosophers believed that Gettier's issue could be easily addressed by ensuring knowledge comes from justified true belief that does not depend on false premises. However, avoiding false premises has not proven to be the solution, as more general Gettier-like problems have been proposed, which demonstrate that justified true belief does not necessarily result from a reasoning process based on a false belief. For example, Keith Lehrer introduced a Gettier-style problem to show cases of actual justification that do not rely on a false proposition (Chisholm, 1986). It appears that in an effort to analyse the concept of propositional knowledge, such counterexamples are harder to overcome because they demonstrate situations where someone lacks knowledge that P, despite holding a justified true belief that P (Moser, Mulder & Trout, 1997).

Response To Gettier Problem

Attempts to respond to Gettier's problem can take one of the following three trends. The major trend is to find a fourth condition to supplement the tripartite justification for knowledge (Dancy, 1985). Most contemporary epistemologists have taken this route, anticipating finding additional conditions such that when added to the conditions of justification, truth, and belief will yield a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge. Proposals for the fourth condition are still underway, and among the remarkable ones is the indefeasibility condition (Moser, Mulder & Trout, 1997). The indefeasibility condition requires that validation appropriate to knowledge be undefeated, meaning that there is no further truth that, had the subject or knower known it, would have defeated his or her current validation for the belief (ibid). However, it seems to me that this

condition is problematic and overambitious because it is not always possible to have all the facts at hand, so that one can 'always' tell when, for example, a justification is weak, pathetic, or rather meagre. The indefeasibility condition requires absolute knowledge, while in practice, we mostly have less than an absolute understanding of the world.

Another trend to respond to Gettier's counterexamples is to revise the justified true belief approach. That is, "accept the counterexamples and alter the tripartite analysis to suit rather than adding anything to it" (Moser, Mulder & Trout, 1997, p. 26). Some epistemologists have come to this view because they think that an attempt to find a fourth condition is a zero-sum game. Such thinkers contend that it is inappropriate to find a fourth condition since justified true belief itself is the wrong approach to the analysis of knowledge. And so, what is needed is to establish a new set of necessary and joint conditions for knowledge. For example, while Robert Nozick proposed a new formulation that he calls a subjunctive or truth-tracking account, Richard Kirkham proposes that we need to start with a definition of knowledge that is so strong that a counterexample to it is logically impossible; a definition that requires that the truth of the belief be logically necessitated by the believer's evidence (Wolff, 1998 & Kirkham, 1998). Thus far, the revision approach, like any other approach, has not succeeded in establishing a new set of necessary and joint conditions for knowledge that are immune to counterexamples and disparagements.

A third possible route to respond to Gettier is by finding "some means to show that the counterexamples do not work," that is, finding some ways to discard Gettier's cases absolutely (Dancy, 1985, p. 26). For instance, this can be achieved either by accepting that there is more than one source of knowledge, so Gettier's cases are cases of knowledge, or by demonstrating that Gettier's cases are not cases of justified true belief. However, it seems to me that this seems to be a very difficult route to follow because it requires instituting some ways towards diffusing absolutely Gettier-style counterexamples.

In my view, none of the three trends has managed to produce an indubitable and satisfactory response to the Gettier problem. Although the Gettier problem proves to be quite complex, I think epistemologists need to keep searching for an appropriate response. Gettier counterexamples are not without criticism. Robert Meyers has criticised and dismissed them as defective cases since they rely on a false principle. Mayer contends that all Gettier sorts of counterexamples fail because they all turn on the false principle that "someone can be justified in accepting certain propositions *h* on evidence *p* even though *p* is false" (Meyer qtd. in Feldman, 1986, p. 252). For Meyer, this principle is false because, for him, one proposition "*p*" can justify another proposition "*h*" only if *p* is true. He thus concludes his critique by endorsing justified true belief analysis as a necessary and jointly sufficient condition for knowledge. Nevertheless, Richard Feldman dismisses this allegation and vindicates Gettier by providing a Gettier-style problem that does not rely on such an allegedly false principle (Feldman, 1986).

Conclusion

Concerning the preceding discussion, it seems to me that Gettier succeeded in showing that there are cases of justified true belief that are not instances of knowledge. This is mainly because, using his counterexamples, he managed to show that justification is subject to undermining or defeat, while the truth is not. It is significant, I think, to note that Gettier is not intending to denounce the tripartite clauses for knowledge. With his counterexamples, he intends to bring to our attention the fact that if we wish to keep justified true belief as our account for knowledge, then we need to at least state an additional qualifying factor, which must be added to the tripartite clauses to form a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge. Gettier counterexamples help us to realise that instances of knowledge require us to go beyond justification since mere justification is prone to defeat or undermining. And so, Gettier succeeds in showing that there are some instances of justified true belief that are not cases of knowledge. The counterexamples also show that contemporary analytical philosophers need to keep searching for the possibility of a definite response to the fundamental question, "What is knowledge"? Finally, it seems to me that although Gettier counterexamples pose a lot of unresolved challenges, they are very handy as they prompt a lot of research in contemporary epistemology. By posing counterexamples to the traditional analysis of knowledge, Gettier has assumed a very handy Socratic role; a midwife role to help us get a hold of how we know things and how we know that we know them, given the possibility of scepticism in our daily lives.

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