

## What is Knowledge?

It would be colossal understatement to say that Anglo-American epistemology of this century has made much of the notion of epistemic justification. First, of course, there is the widely celebrated “justified true belief” JTB account or analysis of knowledge, and analysis we imbibed with our mothers milk. According to the inherited lore of the epistemological tribe, the JTB account enjoyed the status of epistemological orthodoxy until 1963, when it was shattered by Edmund Gettier with his three page paper “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” After 1963 the justified true belief account of knowledge was seen to be defective and lost its exalted status; but even those convinced by Gettier that justification (along with truth) is not *sufficient* for knowledge still mostly think it *necessary* and *nearly* sufficient for knowledge: the basic shape or contour of the concept of knowledge is given by justified true belief, even if a quasi-technical fillip or addendum (“the fourth condition”) is needed to appease Gettier. Of course there is an interesting historical irony here: it isn’t easy to find many really explicit statements of a JTB analysis of knowledge prior to Gettier. It’s almost as if a distinguished critic created a tradition in the very act of destroying it.<sup>1</sup>

- A. Plato’s *Theaetetus* and the definition of knowledge.
  - a. Context of the dialogue: materialism (flux doctrine), empiricism (all knowledge is through the senses), skepticism (knowledge is not possible), and sophism (persuasion).
  - b. Knowledge is not perception.
    - i. Perception is of what is changing and impermanent.
    - ii. Knowledge is of what is unchanging and permanent.
  - c. Knowledge is not relative (to the individual or to society).
    - i. Perception is subjective, not shared, and is relative.
    - ii. Knowledge is objective and shared.
  - d. Knowledge is not opinion. Opinion may or may not be true.
  - e. Knowledge is not true opinion.
    - i. True opinion may be obtained by chance.
    - ii. True opinion may be changed quickly when opposed because it is not “tied down.”
    - iii. True opinion is sufficient for right action.
  - f. Knowledge is true opinion with an account (TOA).
    - i. Opinion is a judgement: X is Y.
    - ii. True is what accords with reality and is objective.
    - iii. A logos is a reason that “ties down,” guarantees, or certifies true belief.
      - 1. A logos is an account or reasons (not sense data).
      - 2. A logos is a necessary truth that couldn’t be otherwise.
      - 3. A logos is often proof derived by elimination of the logical contradiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrant: The Current Debate*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

4. A logos is what is needed for philosophical claims (not for scientific claims or poetic claims).
  5. For example: Philosophical claim: ‘Something must be eternal.’ Proof: the impossibility of the opposite ‘Nothing is eternal.’
- iv. Knowledge is of fundamental philosophical claims about ultimate reality (is matter all there is?), human nature (must there be a human soul?), and what is good and evil for human beings.
  - v. Knowledge is the source of the good for human beings.
  - vi. Knowledge is gained by conversation (the dialectic) in community.
- B. Objections to Plato’s definition of knowledge.
- a. Gettier and justified true belief (JTB)
    - i. Justification is not a rational account.
    - ii. Gettier examples all rely on empirical data or testimony.
    - iii. Plato would disagree with Gettier’s definition of knowledge.
    - iv. Gettier’s definition is more like true opinion.
    - v. Plantinga’s program assumes Gettier’s definition.
    - vi. Neither Gettier or Plantinga get to a rational account that guarantees true belief based on a logos.
  - b. What about certainty?
    - i. An account “certifies” or proves objectively.
    - ii. Objective “certification” is not the same as subjective “certainty.”
    - iii. Proof is not the same as persuasion.
    - iv. If something is knowledge, then an account can be provided.
    - v. If someone claims to know, then an account should be provided.
  - c. What about fallibility?
    - i. Human beings are fallible in knowing.
    - ii. Knowledge itself is something objectively true and so fallibility is not applicable (to say knowledge is fallible is a category mistake).
  - d. What about moral culpability?
    - i. If something is easily knowable, and human beings ought to know it, there is moral culpability for failing to know.
    - ii. How is moral culpability for failing to know experienced?
      1. Failure to know what is real leads to ignorance of what is true and what is good. Intellectual suicide and societal decay and collapse.
      2. Ignorance is harmful to the individual (darkness of mind) and to society (falsehood and bad action) Socrates, ignorance, Athens, and the *Apology*.
- C. A fillip to mollify Gettier: “Knowledge” is justified true belief.
- e. Weak justification is sensory data that provides a high probability of truth (sufficient for most of our everyday judgments).
  - f. Strong justification is by reason and argument such that the opposite is impossible (necessary for foundational philosophical claims).