The tripartite definition of knowledge

INTRODUCTORY

There are different types of knowledge: acquaintance knowledge (I know Oxford well), ability knowledge (I know how to ride a bike), and propositional knowledge (I know that eagles are birds). The first two types of knowledge are very interesting, but we are concerned only with the third, what it is to know some proposition, 'p'.

We intuitively make a distinction between belief and knowledge. People can believe propositions that aren't true; but if you know that p, then p must be true. You can't know something false; if it is false, then you don't know it. You have made a mistake, believing it to be true when it is not. For example, if you claim that flamingos are grey, and you think you know this, you are mistaken. If flamingos are not grey, but pink, then you can't know they are grey. Of course, you believe that they are grey; but that's the difference – beliefs can be false.

There is another distinction between beliefs and knowledge. People can believe propositions for all sorts of reasons. They can have true beliefs without having any *evidence* or *justification* for their beliefs. For example, someone on a jury might think that the person on trial is guilty just from the way they dress. Their belief, that the person is guilty, might be true; but how someone dresses isn't evidence for whether they are a criminal! So belief can be accidentally true, relative to the evidence the person has; if it is, it isn't knowledge.

Someone can hold a belief that is, in fact, true, even when they have evidence to suggest it is false. For example, there is a lot of evidence that astrology does not make accurate predictions, and my horoscope has often been wrong. Suppose on one occasion, I read my horoscope and believe a prediction, although I know there is evidence against thinking it is right. And then this prediction turns out true! Did I *know* it was right? It looks more like my belief is irrational. I had no reason, no evidence, no justification, for believing that prediction was true. Knowledge, then, needs some kind of support, some reason for thinking that the proposition believed is true. Knowledge needs to be *justified*.

THE TRIPARTITE THEORY

The tripartite definition of knowledge only applies to propositional knowledge, knowing 'that p'. Some philosophers argue that a complete analysis of a concept, such as propositional knowledge, ought to state conditions that are together 'equivalent' to knowledge. In other words, if someone knows some proposition, they should fulfil exactly those conditions that the analysis of knowledge states. The 'justified true belief' theory of knowledge is like this. It claims that to know that p involves exactly these three things:

1. the proposition p is true;
2. you believe that p;
3. your belief that p is justified.

It claims these are the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' for knowledge.

Necessary and sufficient conditions

Necessary and sufficient conditions are related to conditional statements, which take the form 'if x, then y'. Such statements relate the truth of two propositions, e.g. 'it is raining' and 'I am getting wet', e.g. 'If it is raining, I am getting wet'. The conditional asserts that if the first statement (known as the antecedent) is true, then the second statement (the consequent) is also true.

Suppose the conditional is true: *if* it is raining, I am getting wet. It follows that if the antecedent is true (it is raining), then the consequent is true (I'm getting wet). It also follows that if the consequent is false (I am not getting wet), then the antecedent is false (it is not raining).

The justified true belief theory of knowledge claims that *if* all the three conditions it lists are satisfied – if p is true, and you believe that p, and your belief is justified – then you know that p. You don't need anything else for knowledge; the three conditions, together, are *sufficient*.

But the theory says more than this. It also says that *if* you know that p, then you have a justified true belief that p. There is no other way to know that p, no other analysis of knowledge. So, it claims, each of the three conditions is *necessary*. You can't have knowledge without meeting exactly these three conditions. If p is false, or you don't believe that p, or your believe that p is not justified, then you don't know that p.

So the theory puts forward *two* conditionals: if all three conditions are satisfied, then you know that p; and if you know that p, then all three conditions are satisfied. This means whenever you have one, you have the other. And so, the theory claims, we can say that knowledge and justified true belief *are the same thing*. Justified true belief is necessary for knowledge (you can't have knowledge without it), but it is also sufficient for knowledge (you don't need anything else).

Justified true belief

The claim that knowledge is justified true belief matches many of our intuitions. First, we cannot know what is false. Of course, we can *think* we know something and it turns out we don't. But that isn't knowledge – we were just wrong to think we knew it. No one disputes this.

Second, it is intuitively plausible to think that we must believe that p in order to know that p. Some philosophers have certainly challenged this, claiming that knowledge is an entirely different mental state from belief. They say either you believe something or you know it; but you don't know something by believing it. The usual reply to this is to point to those occasions on which we make mistakes. Suppose I think I know something, but it turns out I didn't. We would usually say that I had, nevertheless, *believed* it. I believed it, but I thought I knew it; this shows that we can mistake belief for knowledge. If knowledge isn't a kind of belief, this would be puzzling.

Finally, we want to make a distinction between knowledge and true belief. The distinction seems to be a matter of justification.

Justified true belief theory is a theory about knowledge. It doesn't tell us what *justification* is, or how strong it must be.

GETTIER-TYPE OBJECTIONS TO THE TRIPARTITE DEFINITION

Edmund Gettier ('Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?') famously presented cases in which we want to say that someone has justified, true belief but *not* knowledge. These cases became known as 'Gettier cases'.

Here's a typical example: I awake in the middle of the night, and wanting to know what time it is, I reach to where I believe my watch to be. My belief that it is there is justified, as I always put it in the same place, and I remember putting it there before sleeping. However, while I was asleep, a thief stole into my room and knocked my watch from its usual position, but replaced it – as it happens, just where I had put it. Although my belief regarding where my watch is is both true and justified, it does not amount to knowledge, says Gettier.

It's obvious that my belief is true: my watch is where I believe it is. Is it justified? Well, I have all the evidence that I usually have. If you think that my memory of where I put my watch, and my habit of always putting it in the same place, are not enough justification, then you have to say that I *never* know where my watch is when I wake up at night. Gettier assumes we don't want to adopt this type of scepticism. If we can't use memory as good evidence, there is a great deal we don't know (what you had for breakfast, what your name is…)! So, usually, I do know where my watch is. In the case in which the thief knocks off my watch and replaces it, I'm relying on exactly the same evidence – so my belief *is* justified. But, says Gettier, *it isn't knowledge.* The connection between the reasons why I have my belief (its justification) and my belief's being true is, in this case, too *accidental.*

Gettier cases all have the same structure: they portray situations in which we have justified true belief, but not knowledge, by demonstrating how it is accidental, relative to our evidence, that our belief is true, even though the belief is justified by that evidence. So justified true belief is not *sufficient* for knowledge. But that means it is not the *same* as knowledge. If knowledge isn't justified true belief in these cases, then knowledge is *never* justified true belief. Something else must be required to turn justified true belief into knowledge.

The result we want is that in normal cases, I know (where my watch is), but in Gettier cases, I don't, even though I have exactly the same evidence in each case. This shows that for knowledge, we need to connect what makes the belief true and what justifies it.