

Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition
Trinity Term 2022
THIRD PRIZE: DESSISLAVA FESSENKA

Describe and explain why Gettier-style cases demonstrate that the tripartite account of knowledge (the “TAK”) is unsustainable. How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases, do you think? Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

In epistemology, the so-called “tripartite account of knowledge” (the “TAK”) prevails when it comes to defining knowledge. The TAK holds that knowledge about something represents a justified true belief about that something.¹ Mere true belief does not suffice in order for one to have knowledge.² Rather, the knower must have “good reasons”³, i.e. be justified, for considering her belief as true. The knower must have earned the good reasons, i.e. applied relevant truth-bearing skills, and not merely relied on luck or random methods (e.g. coin tossing).⁴

Edmund Gettier has taken issues with the TAK. He has demonstrated that one may form a true belief and have good reasons for considering it true but those reasons may not be sound. Hence, although justified, the true belief may not count as knowledge.⁵ As a result, the TAK is not tenable, in Gettier’s view.⁶

The weak link in the Gettier-style cases (the “GSCs”) appears to be the justification. Examples to the effect are Gettier’s Cases I and II⁷ and Pritchard’s stopped-clock thought experiment.⁸ While the knower has applied (some) skills and has reasons to regard her belief as true, those reasons ultimately do not hold. This might be the case because the reasons are:

- (i) either not the *right* ones, in the sense that while the evidence at hand is true, it is not relevant to inferring the justification in question (e.g. Jones having ten cents in his pocket in Gettier’s Case I);
- (ii) or not *good enough*, in the sense that, although the first line of evidence (perception, testimony, experience) might appear true, it does not obtain a justification on a closer inspection as it lacks sufficient epistemic foundations.

The GSCs raise several questions about the fundamentals of a tenable theory of knowledge (“TK”). First, what the proper standards of knowledge are and, in particular, if they should require justification and/or some other component(s) (“**Question 1**”). Second,

¹ Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 22. Steele, K., and Orri Stefansson, H., (2020), section 1. Gettier, E. (1963), p. 444.

² Pritchard, D. (2018), pp. 4-5.

³ As per Plato, as referred to by Pritchard and Huemer. Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 22. Huemer, M., ed, p. 446.

⁴ Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 22. In the same vein, deliberations about epistemic rationality, cognitive success and epistemic virtue at Pritchard, D. (2018), pp. 41-42 and p. 55, and also at Pritchard, D. (2008), p. 3.

⁵ Gettier, E. (1963), pp. 444-446.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 444.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 445.

⁸ Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 24.

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whether and what involvement in or subjective attitude towards knowledge-acquisition is required from the agent, beyond merely applying truth-bearing skills, in order to make up for a possible false justification as in GSCs (“**Question 2**”). Third, whether methodological fixes to our approach to knowledge are needed in order to render any TK plausible (“**Question 3**”). A Gettier-proof TK would supposedly have to answer at least some of these questions.

Several epistemic theories have attempted to deal with some of these aspects from different angles. I elaborate here on theories that tackle the question of what “knowing” is and not primarily focus on elements of knowledge (such as belief or truth conditions⁹).

Reliabilism and Ayer’s TK have taken on Question 1. Reliabilism postulates that knowledge requires a true belief that is (merely) reliably formed, i.e. formed through the *right*, skill-based cognitive-success-yielding, methods.¹⁰ Ayer substitutes justification with the condition that the knower must have the right to be sure of what she thinks she knows.¹¹ That means, she must have acquired knowledge through “*the accredited routes*”, by “*rational methods*”, which are generally case-specific.¹² Yet, both theories fail to fully isolate the interferences of external factors (luck, third-part malfeasance) with the agent’s involvement in and subjective attitude towards knowledge-acquisition so that the external factors do not trump the agent’s actual *knowing*.¹³

Nozick’s TK¹⁴ overcomes this deficiency by replacing the justification condition with two new ones. First, were the proposition not true, the knower’s belief would not have been either. And second, when the proposition is true, the knower’s belief would be either.¹⁵ While this TK technically appears to resolve Questions 1 and 2, its plausibility potentially fails on two accounts. First, Nozick’s TK is potentially too restrictive, as the examples with the person in the tank and the dictator illustrate.¹⁶ Some of what we consider knowledge might fail the two conditions above. Second, Nozick’s TK leaves the door ajar for scepticism by setting the same higher standards to also *knowing* that the sceptical account does *not* hold.¹⁷

Clark, and Lehrer and Paxton have proposed TKs that ramp up the TAK to include further conditions for a justified true belief to represent knowledge. Clarke’s TAK¹⁸ requires that

⁹ As is essentially the case with Goldman’s causal theory. Goldman, A. (1967), pp. 451 and 461.

¹⁰ Pritchard, D. (2018), pp. 54-55. Pritchard, D. (2008), p. 3.

¹¹ Ayer, A.J. (1956), pp. 440-443.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 441-442.

¹³ E.g. looking at the clock or a thermometer in the example at Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 55.

¹⁴ Nozick, R. (1981), pp. 475-490.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 476-479.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 478.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 481-483.

¹⁸ Clark, M. (1963), pp. 447-449.

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the justification is "*fully grounded*". That is, the knower must have found out, i.e. really have grounds to believe.¹⁹ Lehrer and Paxton have further qualified the justification requirement to the effect that a complete justification is undefeated.²⁰ That is, when the knower is justified in believing that the defeater of the justification is false.²¹ The problem with those accounts is that they potentially descend in regress and infinitism²² when requesting justification of the justification or justification²³ of the undefeatability of the justification, respectively.

A possible further approach to some of those issues is looking at justification from the angle of Question 2 solely. Epistemic rationality ("**ER**") and virtue epistemology ("**VE**") attempt to provide processes for truth- and knowledge-acquisition from (a rational) agent's perspective. On one readings of ER, it is construed as a precondition to the soundness and credibility of a justification²⁴ and, thus, to the "*justifiedness*"²⁵ of a belief. The agent's application of ER warrants to a greater extent the choice of legitimate justifiers (internal or external²⁶), i.e. such that are well-founded because they relate to correct and relevant information in a logically sound manner.²⁷ ER effectively suggests methods for sourcing legitimate justifiers at the *time* of knowledge-formation in order to attain justifiedness of a belief.²⁸ VE explains knowledge as a true belief formed through the agent's epistemic virtues and cognitive faculties, i.e. due to the agent's cognitive success rather than luck.²⁹ Neither ER nor VE appear to inoculate a true belief against GSCs, however. As it turns out in Linda Zagzebski's example about Mary seeing her husband,³⁰ the agent's own faculties and capabilities could expose a true belief to GSCs.

Third approach to overcoming GSCs could be to try some methodological fixes to knowledge attribution, as per Question 3. One is to admit that knowledge is context-sensitive and whether one *knows* depends on the (objective, linguistic, psychological) context in which propositions are uttered, as contextualism suggests.³¹ Another would be to apply Moorean common sense when assessing if a true belief is justified.³² Accepting contextualists' view would be tantamount to conceding that knowledge is not susceptible

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 448.

²⁰ Lehrer, K., Paxton, T. (1969), pp. 464-474.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 467-468.

²² Pritchard, D. (2018), p. 33. Huemer, M., ed., p. 369.

²³ Admission to that effect could be read into Clark's conclusion at p. 449.

²⁴ Pritchard, D. (2018), pp. 41-42.

²⁵ Bach, K. (1985), as quoted in Pappas, G. (2014), section 3.

²⁶ Pappas, G. (2014), section 3.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ *Ibid*. Ichikawa Jenkins, J., and Steup, M. (2012), section 1.3.

²⁹ Pritchard, D. (2008), p. 4.

³⁰ As cited *ibid*, p. 5.

³¹ DeRose, K. (1992), pp. 492-494.

³² Moore, G.E. (1939), pp. 602-603.

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to strict definition or standard-setting.³³ Which is an admission to the logical *impossibility* of a coherent – at least not normative, but probably semantic – TK. The common sense methodology begs the question: “Common sense by whose account – of a child, an adult, a novice, an expert? If/what credibility criteria do we set and how?”.

This recapitulation leaves us with a mixed bag of half-hearted solutions for a TK. Were we then to approach the matter as politicians would, we should probably choose solutions addressing each Questions 1 to 3 and hope that, in combination, they will do the trick. My recipe would be: sticking to the TAK, adding a pinch of both ER and VE, topping all off with sufficient common sense, and still relying on intuition as to what constitutes a justification in a given case. Were this to be formulated as a TK, it would read: knowledge is a true belief that – from an epistemically rational agent’s perspective while applying habitual and sufficient intellectual virtues, cognitive faculties, common sense and intuition – can reasonably be taken to be justified. And I brace for all the GSCs to come in response.

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³³ DeRose, K. (1992), pp. 496-497.

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