Philosophy Higher: Problems of Knowledge
[Epistemology Section 1 – Introduction to Epistemology]

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1. What is knowledge?

Definitions and counterexamples

Saying *what something is* typically involves giving a *definition* of the word that refers to it. One way to give a definition is to say under what circumstances a sentence containing the word would be *true*. So, for example, we can define ‘even number’ by saying under what circumstances a sentence of the form ‘*X* is an even number’ is true:

For any number, *X*:  
* X is an even number if and only if *X* is divisible by 2

A *counterexample* is an example that shows a definition (or a theory) to be false. So, for example, if we could find an even number that was not divisible by 2 it would show that the above definition was false.

A counterexample would show that the definition was incorrect for any number - a definition is either right or wrong, it cannot be right for some numbers and wrong for others.

The Tripartite Definition of Knowledge

From Plato’s time until 1963 many philosophers thought that the following definition correctly captured the meaning of ‘know’. For any person, *S*, and any proposition p (a *proposition* is what is expressed by a sentence that *says something*, e.g. ‘snow is white’, ‘the sun is shining’ etc. (as opposed to a sentence that *asks, gives an order*, etc.)):

*S* knows that *p* if and only if:

1. *p* is true  
2. *S* believes that *p*  
3. *S* is justified in believing that *p*

The is the *tripartite* (i.e in three parts) definition of knowledge, also known as the JTB account (Justified True Belief). In brief, it says that knowledge is *justified true belief*.

For a belief to be justified is for it to be based on the right kind of *evidence* or *reasons*. But there are some quite different ideas about what this amounts to. The traditional idea is perhaps best captured by saying that *S* is justified in believing that *p* if and only if the way things appear to *S* - the subjective state that *S* is in - is of a kind such that when one is in that kind of state it is rational for one to believe that *p*. But one can certainly raise questions over just which states these are, and indeed many sceptical arguments (see below) claim to show that one *never* has justification for a belief, no matter what subjective state one is in.

Gettier Counterexamples

In 1963, Edmund Gettier put forward some counterexamples to the tripartite definition of knowledge, and most philosophers now accept that these counterexamples show that the tripartite definition is false. If this is correct, then knowledge is NOT justified true belief. It’s not that sometimes knowledge is justified true belief and sometimes it isn’t. A definition either correctly captures what knowledge is, or it doesn’t. (This is not to deny that some cases of knowledge are cases of justified true belief - but this cannot be what *makes* them cases of knowledge).
Gettier’s own counterexamples are slightly complex but his point can be shown with simpler examples:

Gettier counterexample 1: You look at a TV screen on the wall, mistakenly thinking it’s a window. Based on what you see, you form the belief that it is raining outside. Given your visual experiences, this belief was justified. As a matter of fact, it is raining outside. So you have a justified, true belief. But you didn’t know that it was raining outside. It was just luck that your belief happened to be true.

Gettier counterexample 2: Unbeknown to you, I have an identical twin. My twin appears at the front of the lecture theatre and, seeing this, you form the belief that Simon is in the room. Given what you see, your belief is justified. As a matter of fact, I am in the room (sitting at the back where you cannot see me). So you have a justified true belief - but not knowledge.

Post-1963 epistemology

This is not on the syllabus, but in the lecture I’ll give some brief hints at the direction epistemology took after Gettier’s paper. Many new theories of knowledge were proposed which often involved adding a fourth condition to the tripartite account or else substituting the justification condition for something else. Reliability, according to which knowledge is true belief acquired through a reliable process, has been among the more influential theories. Currently a view called contextualism is receiving much attention. Some of these views aim to provide responses to sceptical arguments at the same time as giving a satisfactory definition on knowledge.

2. Scepticism

What is it?

Scepticism: Knowledge is impossible

Scepticism isn’t merely a matter of doubting things. The sceptic claims that we do not, and cannot, know anything. There are many forms of scepticism but often with similar structure: e.g. those found in Descartes or Hume. Some sceptical arguments concern only a limited range of knowledge, e.g. what we can perceive, or what we can predict. But they often ramify into global scepticism, scepticism that claims we cannot have knowledge of anything whatsoever.

Who is a sceptic?

Almost no one! Most philosophers regard sceptical arguments as presenting worrying puzzles, the solution to which ought to tell us something interesting about the nature of knowledge.

Why all the fuss?

Why do we need knowledge? Wouldn’t we be okay provided most of what we believed was true?

The problem is that sceptical arguments don’t just threaten knowledge; they usually threaten our justification for our beliefs. And if none of our beliefs can be justified then presumably we cannot have any reason for believing one thing rather than another. As Bertrand Russell put it:

[If scepticism were true...] There is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity. The lunatic who believes that he is a poached egg is to be condemned solely on the ground that he is in a minority. [Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (Routledge, 2000; first published 1946), p. 646]