

What is Knowledge?

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What is knowledge? In this paper I will attempt to provide a satisfactory answer to this question by defining knowledge—i.e. by providing the conditions for knowledge. First, I will provide a brief review of the relevant literature. Second, I will provide and explain a new account of knowledge according to which knowledge is correctly justified specific and true belief (CJSTB). I will argue that knowledge is correctly justified specific and true belief (CJSTB) by showing that it classifies instances of knowledge and non-knowledge correctly.

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates and Theaetetus shed light on what knowledge is not: knowledge is not true belief (908). Socrates shows that people can be made to believe something true and thus have a true belief, but fail to have knowledge. He gives the example of a lawyer who convinces a jury to believe something that happens to be true by using convincing rhetoric rather than appealing to the facts (908). The jury members cannot *know* what the lawyer has convinced them of, e.g. that Phil is guilty. This is something that "can be known only by an eyewitness" (908). Yet, they possess a true belief. Therefore, true belief and knowledge are not the same thing. Rather, as Theaetetus remarks, knowledge is true belief with an account (908).

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Many philosophers argued that that “account” is justification and that knowledge is justified true belief (JTB). Roderick Chisholm, for example, held that S knows that P if and only if (i) S accepts P, (ii) S has adequate evidence for P, and (iii) P is true (16). But later on, Edmund Gettier showed that knowledge cannot be justified true belief. He did this using two cases (122). The first case is about two job candidates, Smith and Jones. Smith has enough evidence to be justified in believing that Jones will get the job and that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. Smith’s evidence “could be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected,” and Smith counted the coins in Jones’s pocket just ten minutes ago (122). So Smith makes the trivial step and concludes that the person who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket. Since Smith is justified in believing the first case, he is also justified in believing the inference. But as it turns out, Smith is the one who will get the job, not Jones, and unknowingly Smith also has 10 coins in his pocket. So Smith *believes* that the person with 10 coins in his pocket will get the job, it is *true* that the person with 10 coins in his pocket will get the job, and he is *justified* in believing that the person with 10 coins in his pocket will get the job (122). Thus, Smith satisfies all three conditions of JTB. If JTB is knowledge, then Smith has knowledge. But Smith cannot have knowledge because it was only by fluke that he was correct. Thus, JTB is not knowledge.

In the second case, Smith has strong evidence that Jones owns a Ford (122). His evidence could be that Jones has always owned a Ford, and Jones recently offered him a ride while driving a Ford. Smith has another friend named Brown. Smith has no idea about Brown’s whereabouts. Smith chooses three random locations and constructs three propositions that follow from his belief that Jones owns a Ford. Here is one of the propositions: either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona (122). He believes that this disjunctive proposition is true and since he was justified in believing in the first case, he is also justified in believing the inference. But in reality, Jones does not own a Ford. He is driving a rental. And as it turns out, Brown actually is in Barcelona. So the disjunction that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona is *true*, Smith *believes* that it’s true, and Smith is *justified* in believing that it’s true (123). Thus, Smith satisfies all three conditions of JTB. If JTB is knowledge, then Smith has knowledge. But Smith cannot have knowledge because it was only by fluke that he was correct. Thus JTB is not knowledge.

Gettier cases are not the only thing standing in the way of the JTB account of knowledge. Alvin Goldman provides a Gettier-like case (772). We will call it the “barn façade” case. Henry is driving in the countryside with his son. Unbeknownst to Henry, they have travelled into barn façade country which is filled with barn façades made out of papier-mâché.

Although they are made out of papier-mâché, they look exactly like real barns from the road. Anyone who saw them, would mistake them for actual barns. As they are driving through barn façade country, Henry shouts “Look! It’s a barn.” The barn he is referring to actually happens to be a real barn. So, Henry *believes* that it’s a barn, he is *justified* in believing that it’s a barn (his senses inform him that it’s a barn), and it’s *true* that it is a barn (773). Therefore, Henry has knowledge according to the JTB account. But it is only by fluke that he is right since he would have said the same thing about a barn façade and been wrong. Thus, Henry does not have knowledge; JTB cannot be knowledge.

Robert Nozick provides a convincing account of knowledge that gives the correct verdict in both aforementioned cases. According to Nozick, you know that *p* iff: (i) *p* is true, (ii) you believe *p*, (iii) were *p* not true you wouldn’t believe it, (iv) were *p* true, you would believe it (173). Nozick defends this account on a case by case basis (just as I will do) by showing that it gives the correct verdict in various cases. Let’s first apply it to the Gettier cases. If what Smith believed in either case was false, he’d still believe those things. For example, if it were false that the person with 10 coins in their pocket will get the job, Smith would still believe that the person with 10 coins in their pocket will get the job. Therefore, condition (iii) of Nozick’s account of knowledge has not been met (173). So Smith does not have knowledge. This is the same for the second case. Smith would still believe the proposition that ‘either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona’ is true, thus violating the third condition (173). Nozick also shows that his view gives the correct verdict in barn façade cases. If it were a barn façade that Henry was referring to when he said “it’s a barn,” he would still believe that it’s a barn. This violates condition (iii) (175). Thus, Henry does not know that it’s a barn. I will discuss the issues with Nozick’s view later when I discuss my own view.

The next thing I will do is provide my account of knowledge. Knowledge is correctly justified specific and true belief (CJSTB). Hence, subject *s* knows that *p* if and only if:

- i. *p* is true,
- ii. *s* believes that *p*,
- iii. *s* is justified in believing that *p*,
- iv. *s*’s justification for believing that *p* is non-erroneous (i.e. correct), and

v. s's belief is specific—that is, accurately depicted (not weaker or stronger than what it truly is).

According to my view, a justification is considered non-erroneous if (a) the justification correctly informs the belief, (b) the justification is itself correctly informed, and (c) the justification is a good one—i.e. it is reliable. If a justification fails to meet even one of these conditions, then it is erroneous. I will argue for my account of knowledge (CJSTB) on a case by case basis. I will show that CJSTB provides the sufficient and necessary conditions for someone's knowing a given proposition by showing that CJSTB accurately classifies instances of knowledge and non-knowledge.

Firstly, CJSTB accurately classifies the case of a delusional schizophrenic. George is a delusional schizophrenic. George believes that the government is trying to poison him with radioactive particles delivered through his tap water. It is true that the government is trying to do so. George is justified in believing that the government is trying to poison him because the voices in his head tell him so. Hence, according to the first three conditions (i.e. justified true belief), George knows that the government is trying to poison him. But George doesn't know because his justification is insufficient. His only justification is the voices in his head which are auditory hallucinations. So although George is justified, he is not correctly justified—his information is hallucinatory. Hence, his justification is erroneous. Thus, according to CJSTB George does not know that the government is trying to poison him because although he is justified, what justifies his belief is erroneous. Therefore, CJSTB classifies this instance correctly.

Someone might object that CJSTB misclassifies George's case by ascribing knowledge to him. Since what the voices tell him is in accordance with truth (they have correctly informed him of the government's nefarious goal), then George's justification is non-erroneous (hence satisfying the conditions for knowledge). In response to this I say that the objector has misunderstood the linguistics and/or meaning of condition (iv). Condition (iv) requires correctness (non-erroneousness) in three ways. If the justification fails to be correct in all three ways, then it fails to satisfy condition (iv). Now, recall the three ways of correctness: (a) the justification correctly informs the belief, (b) the justification is itself correctly informed, and (c) the justification is a good one—i.e. it is reliable. In response to the objection, George's justification is not correct in all three ways. It is only correct in sense (a) because what the voices say (his justification) correctly informs his belief that the government is trying to poison him. That is, the voices do not misinform him—they provide correct information. However, sense (b) and (c) are not met. In order for sense (b) to be met, it must be

the case that the voices say what they say because it is true. But this is not the case. The voices are hallucinations. They don't say anything in virtue of truth because they are derived from false delusions. Sense (c) is trivially not met because voices in one's head are not a good or reliable justification.

Secondly, CJSTB accurately classifies Gettier cases. Consider the first case where Smith has a justified true belief that the person with 10 coins in his pocket will get the job. This case does not satisfy conditions (iv) and (v) of CJSTB. Smith's justification is erroneous because the president of the company who assured him that Jones would get the job was either lying or was himself mistaken. In either case Jones's evidence is erroneous and thus not in accordance with truth. Hence, condition (iv) is not satisfied. Furthermore, Smith's belief fails to meet condition (v) by not being specific. What Smith believes is that Jones will get the job and Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. When Smith notices the entailment of his belief and decides to believe that entailment—that the person with 10 coins in his pocket will get the job—Smith has weakened his belief. And by doing so, Smith has misrepresented his own belief. He has weakened his belief by generalizing it. He generalizes his belief by replacing 'Jones' with 'the person who has 10 coins in his pocket.' There are probably many people with 10 coins in their pocket and Smith's revised belief could be referring to any of those people. But that is not what Smith really believes. His belief is referring to Jones. Though it is a logical inference (existential generalization), condition (v) disallows this kind of move. The belief must not be weakened or strengthened because in doing so we lose the essence of the actual belief. Hence the entailment is not the actual belief but a near-belief. So when we judge Smith's actual belief (Jones will get the job...), we find that he does not know that Jones will get the job and that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket since it is false. The Ford case is slightly different: Smith's evidence is in accordance with the truth (what Smith sees is true—Jones is driving a Ford). Assume by the principle of charity that it is also true that in the past Jones has always owned a Ford. Even if his evidence holds, his reasoning does not; it is flawed. Smith infers that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona from his belief that Jones owns a Ford. But it is false that Jones owns a Ford. Thus, Smith's justification is not a good one because his reasoning for it is flawed. Hence condition (iv) is *not* satisfied. Furthermore, condition (v) is not met since Smith weakens his belief by addition, i.e. by creating a disjunction.

Someone might object in two ways: (1) we must allow such logical moves—we can't just throw logic out the window—and (2) Smith's evidence does not need to be that the president of the company informed him—it could be in accordance with truth. To (1) I say we are not dismissing logic. All we are doing is requiring that beliefs be assessed in their original form

or in the way that best represents the person's actual belief. The weakened belief is not true in every instance that the original belief is—the weakened belief is true in more instances. Similarly, a strengthened belief is true in fewer instances. Thus, it is not unreasonable to require that we maintain the essence of the actual belief—knowledge should deal with actual belief, not near-beliefs. Since maintaining that essence includes maintaining truth values, we can reasonably exclude certain logical moves. To (2) I say that even if all of Smith's evidence is in accordance with truth, he still fails to be correct in the third way because his reasoning is flawed. He also fails to satisfy condition (iv).

Thirdly, CJSTB accurately classifies instances of knowledge and non-knowledge in barn façade country. As the story goes, Henry is driving through barn façade country, where barn façades are bountiful and true barns are scarce (but Henry does not know this). When Henry spots what he thinks is a barn, he exclaims "it's a barn!" As it turns out, it is a barn. Thus, Henry's belief is a true belief, his justification correctly informs his belief, and his justification itself is correctly informed. That is, his justification that it looks like a barn correctly informs his belief that it is a barn. And his justification that it looks like a barn is correctly informed by the fact that it is a barn. Neither Henry's belief nor his justification is led astray because they are informed by truth. Thus his justification is correct in senses (a) and (b). This example is meant to show that even if your justification is correctly informed and your belief is not justified by a falsehood (i.e. it is correctly informed), you still don't have knowledge. However, this does not refute CJSTB because it still does not meet sense (c) of non-erroneousness. The justification is not a good or reliable one because not everything that looks like a barn is in fact a barn. Therefore, the justification is erroneous in one sense and hence does not satisfy condition (iv). Therefore, CJSTB classifies this instance correctly.

One might object that this is not a satisfactory classification because perhaps your justification is not based on it looking like a barn. To this I ask: What other justification could you possibly have for believing that it's a barn? A psychic intuition? There doesn't seem to be a sufficient answer which will also be non-erroneous. The objector might continue by asserting that perhaps you believe it's a barn because it is. But this is not a justification. Most people can recall a time when they were arguing with their sibling, friend etc. while that individual keeps insisting "because it is," and you keep asking "but why?" This instance of frustration demonstrates just how implausible of a justification "because it is" really is.

This is my reason for objecting to Nozick's account of knowledge and coming up with my own. His subjunctive conditionals e.g. *were it false, you wouldn't believe it*, have this "because it is" nature. Furthermore, Nozick's

account is going to give the wrong verdict in certain cases where people are justified but not correctly justified as CJSTB requires. For example, imagine that you always get these gut reactions or hunches to things. The gut reactions are always right; they are 100 percent accurate. But they are unfounded. They don't arise from the evidence or from contemplation, they just happen. Imagine now that you have the gut reaction that your friend will get the job they are applying to. Your gut reactions have never failed you, so you believe that your friend will get the job. As always, your gut was right—your friend gets the job. If it were false and your friend wasn't going to get the job, you would not believe it because you would have received a different gut reaction (your gut reaction would be that your friend will not get the job since your gut reactions are 100 percent accurate). Thus, on Nozick's view you knew that your friend would get the job. You believed it. You were justified in believing it. Your belief was true. If your belief were false, you wouldn't believe it. If your belief were true, you would believe it. But do we really want to say that you have knowledge in this case? You have these supernatural gut reactions that always reflect the truth. But you cannot explain or justify your gut reactions. Hence, it does not appear that you had knowledge. CJSTB correctly classifies this instance. This gut reaction, though extremely accurate, is like the schizophrenic's hallucinations. The justification itself is not correctly informed, failing to be correct in sense (b), because it is not informed at all. As was said, the gut reactions are unfounded.

It is now clear that CJSTB provides the sufficient and necessary conditions for someone's knowing a given proposition because CJSTB accurately classifies instances of knowledge and non-knowledge.

Someone might be inclined to reject this conclusion because this definition seems to greatly constrict knowledge. Since, according to my account, one's justification for believing something cannot be erroneous in any sense, it becomes very difficult to know much of anything. How do you know you have a hand? You might think that it is by intuition or by the senses. But in either case, one could argue, you don't know you have a hand because both intuition and one's senses are poor justifications due to being unreliable—erroneous in sense (c). But much of what we believe we know is justified by intuition and the senses. Therefore, we can know only very little if CJSTB is the correct account of knowledge.

My response to the objector is that they are mistaken. It is not true that we can know only very little if CJSTB is the correct account of knowledge. It may be true that our senses are, on occasion, unreliable. We can think of cases such as a stick looking bent in water when it is actually a straight stick. But this does not prove that our senses are unreliable because we can correct this by pulling the stick out of the water and checking if it

is bent or straight. We can verify that the stick is straight by looking at it (by using our senses) outside of the water. The existence of optical illusions (and other kinds of illusions) does not prove that our senses are unreliable. After all, we are aware that they are illusions. The actual world is not like barn façade country. Our senses are actually quite reliable. They may be more reliable in some circumstances and less reliable in others, but on a whole they are quite reliable.

In conclusion, I have argued for a new account of knowledge. According to my account, knowledge has 5 conditions: belief, truth of belief, justification, correctness of justification (in three ways), and specificity. I have argued that knowledge is correctly justified specific and true belief (CJSTB) by demonstrating that this account gives the correct verdict in difficult cases. CJSTB handles Gettier cases, Barn façade cases, and other cases which have been and are problematic for other accounts of knowledge. CJSTB now appears to be, at the very least, a compelling definition of knowledge.

Works Cited

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