

Justified True Belief and its Problems

. . . [Propositional knowledge] is knowledge which is described by phrases of the form “knowledge that p,” with “p” being replaced by some indicative sentence (such as “Kangaroos have no wings”). It is knowledge of a truth or fact — knowledge of how the world is in whatever respect is being described by a given occurrence of “p”. Usually, when epistemologists [philosophers of knowledge] talk simply of knowledge they are referring to propositional knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge which we attribute to ourselves routinely and fundamentally.

Hence, it is philosophically important to ask what, more fully, such knowledge *is*. If we do not fully understand what it is, will we not fully understand ourselves either? That is a possibility, as philosophers have long realized. Those questions are ancient ones; in his own way, Plato asked them.

. . . [D]ifferent epistemologists would routinely have offered in reply some more or less detailed and precise version of the following generic three-part analysis of what it is for a person to have knowledge that p (for any particular “p”):

1. *Belief*. The person *believes* that p. This belief might be more or less confident. And it might — but it need not — be manifested in the person’s speech, such as by her saying that p or by her saying that she believes that p. All that is needed, strictly speaking, is for her belief to *exist* (while possessing at least the two further properties that are about to be listed).
2. *Truth*. The person’s belief that p needs to be *true*. If it is incorrect instead, then — no matter what else is good or useful about it — it is not knowledge. It would only be something else, something lesser. Admittedly, even when a belief is mistaken it can feel to the believer as if it is true. But in that circumstance the feeling would be mistaken; and so the belief would not be knowledge, no matter how much it might feel to the believer like knowledge.
3. *Justification*. The person’s belief that p needs to be well *supported*, such as by being based upon some good evidence or reasoning, or perhaps some other kind of rational justification. Otherwise, the belief, even if it is true, may as well be a lucky guess. It would be correct without being knowledge. It would only be something else, something lesser.

Supposedly . . ., each of those three conditions needs to be satisfied, if there is to be knowledge; and, equally, if all are satisfied together, the result is an instance of knowledge. In other words, the analysis presents what it regards as being three individually necessary, and jointly sufficient, kinds of condition for having an instance of knowledge that p.

The analysis is generally called the *justified-true-belief* form of analysis of knowledge (or, for short, JTB). For instance, your knowing that you are a person would be your believing (as you do) that you are one, along with this belief’s being true (as it is) and its resting (as it does) upon much good evidence. That evidence will probably include such matters as your having been told that you are a person, your having reflected upon what it is to be a person, your seeing relevant similarities between yourself and other persons, and so on.

It is important to bear in mind that JTB, as presented here, is a *generic* analysis. It is intended to describe a general structuring which can absorb or generate comparatively specific analyses that might be suggested, either of all knowledge at once or of particular kinds of knowledge. It provides a basic outline — a *form* — of a theory. In practice, epistemologists would suggest further details, while respecting that general form. So, even when particular analyses suggested by particular philosophers at first glance seem different to JTB, these analyses can simply be more specific instances or versions of that more general form of theory.

The cow that proves you can't be right accidentally

Esther Inglis-Arkell

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Two scientists hold two different beliefs. Both are supported by the available data, but when new information comes in, one scientist is shown to really know what happened, while the other just guessed. But is that knowledge? A theoretical cow says no.

What's the difference between believing something and knowing it? Some people would say that the difference is proof. If someone is proved right, they didn't just believe something to be true, they knew it was true. Possibly.

Edmund Gettier, an American philosopher, was born in 1927, and so spent much of his life listening to different theories being confirmed or debunked. The proponents of some were exalted while the proponents of others were disparaged. While there's certainly a case to be made for some scientists correctly following data while their colleagues missed vital clues, does that necessarily make some famous visionaries "know" the answer while others just have false beliefs? When data can be interpreted multiple ways, every interpretation is equally valid. And some people have stumbled on the correct answer using false reasoning. We can be smug and say we "knew" we were right, but we weren't right at all.

To illustrate this Gettier came up with a thought experiment famously known as The Cow in the Field. A farmer sees that his cow is missing. As he's fretting, the mailman comes up and assures him that the cow is just in the next field over. The farmer wants to be sure, so he goes out and sees a familiar black and white splotch in the nearby field. He returns and says, yes, he now believes the cow is in the field. When the mailman passes back along that field, though, he realizes that the farmer couldn't have seen the cow. Yes, the cow was in the field, but it was hidden in a small grouping of trees. What the farmer actually saw was a piece of paper clinging to the outside of the trees that is splotched with black paint.

The cow was in the field, but the farmer was wrong. His belief, as it turns out, was not justified, although it was understandable. He was wrong in his reasoning - and would have come to the wrong conclusion if the cow hadn't helped him out. . . .

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