Gettier's objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge[1]

In this handout, we discuss a famous objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge and two responses to it. For more on the tripartite definition, see the handout 'The tripartite definition of knowledge'.

THE TRIPARTITE DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE

The tripartite definition of knowledge claims that knowledge is justified, true belief. It claims that you know some proposition, p, if and only if

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

The tripartite definition aims to provide a complete analysis of the concept and nature of propositional knowledge. Its three conditions, taken together, are intended to be equivalent to knowledge, to be the same thing as knowledge. So, first, if you fulfil those conditions, then you know the proposition. If all the three conditions it lists are satisfied – if you have a justified true belief that p – then you know that p. You don't need anything else for knowledge; the three conditions, together, are sufficient. Second, if you know some proposition, you fulfil exactly those three conditions. 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. If p is false, or you don't believe that p, or your belief that p is not justified, then you don't know that p. The conditions are necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge that p.

The definition 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 is what is meant by the phrase 'if and only if' – that the conditions that follow are both necessary and sufficient. We may thus conclude 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).

GETTIER'S OBJECTION: ARE THE CONDITIONS JOINTLY SUFFICIENT?

In his article 'Is justified true belief knowledge?', Edmund Gettier famously presented cases in which we want to say that someone has justified, true belief but not knowledge. They show that the three conditions of the tripartite definition are not sufficient for knowledge.

---

[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 37, 47-55

Gettier starts by claiming, uncontroversially, that deductive argument preserves justification. Suppose you are justified in believing that p (say, that Socrates is a man and that all men are mortal), and p entails another proposition, q (that Socrates is mortal). If you deduce q from p, you are also justified in believing that q. Your reasons for believing the premises are also reasons for believing the conclusion, because if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true.

He then gives two counterexamples to the tripartite definition. In the first, Smith and Jones are applying for the same job. Smith has excellent reason to believe that Jones will get the job, e.g. Smith has been told this by the employer. Smith also has excellent reason to believe that Jones has ten coins in his pocket, e.g. Smith has just counted them. Therefore, both of these beliefs are justified. Smith then puts the two beliefs together and deduces that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. This belief is justified, because it is inferred deductively from justified beliefs. However, it turns out that Jones doesn't get the job, Smith does. It also so happens that, unknown to him, Smith also has ten coins in his pocket. So Smith's belief that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket happens to be true.

Smith's belief is both true and justified, but we shouldn't say that Smith knows that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Smith inferred his belief from a false belief, namely that Jones would get the job. So the reason Smith has for his belief is false. What makes his belief true (Smith, who has ten coins in his pocket, gets the job) has come apart from what justifies his belief (the evidence that Jones, who has ten coins in his pocket, will get the job). There is no connection between what justifies his belief and his belief's being true. We might say that it is only by luck that his belief is true.

In the second counterexample, Smith believes that Jones owns a Ford. Smith remembers that for as long as he has known him, Jones has always had a Ford, and Jones has just offered Smith a lift while driving a Ford. So Smith's belief is justified. Smith then thinks about another acquaintance of his, Brown, and wonders where he is. He has no idea, and chooses a place name at random, Barcelona, say. He then deduces the belief (quite oddly, but don't worry about that) that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona.

An either/or claim is called a 'disjunction'. A disjunction is true if either (or both) of the two 'disjuncts' are true. So 'Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona' is true if

1) Jones owns a Ford; or
2) Brown is in Barcelona; or
3) Both (1) and (2) are true.

Now, from 'Jones owns a Ford', Smith can deduce that 'Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona', because it is impossible for the premise 'Jones owns a Ford' to be true and the conclusion 'Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona' to be false. His belief that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona is also justified, because he has deduced it from his justified belief that

Jones owns a Ford. However, unknown to Smith, Jones has just sold his Ford and is currently driving a rented Ford, so he doesn't own a Ford. But by complete coincidence, and unknown to Smith, Brown is in Barcelona. So the proposition 'Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona' is true – not because (1) Jones owns a Ford, but because (2) Brown is in Barcelona.

So Smith's belief is both true and justified, but we shouldn't say that Smith knows that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona. Once again, Smith inferred his belief from a false belief, namely that Jones owns a Ford. So the reason Smith has for his belief is false. What makes his belief true (that Brown is in Barcelona) has come apart from what justifies his belief (that Jones owns a Ford). There is, again, no connection between what justifies his belief and his belief's being true.

Thought experiments are a philosophical method designed to test a hypothesis or philosophical claim through imagining a hypothetical situation, and coming to a judgment. We can use thought experiments, like the examples Gettier gives, to test definitions of knowledge. Examples of justified true belief without knowledge became known as 'Gettier cases'. They all describe situations in which we have justified true belief, but not knowledge, because the belief is only true by chance, given the evidence that justifies it. So justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.

This shows that justified true belief is not the same as knowledge. If A is the same thing as B, then you cannot have A without B or B without A. A and B are just one thing – you haven't it or you don't. For example, you can't have water without H_2O. If you could, that would show that water is not the same thing as H_2O. So if knowledge isn't justified true belief in Gettier cases, then knowledge and justified true belief can come apart. That shows that they are not the same thing, and so the definition of knowledge as justified true belief is false.

Gettier's argument poses a serious challenge to the tripartite definition of knowledge. In the resulting debate over what knowledge is, most attention has focused on the claim about justification. One response is to *strengthen* what we mean by justification in the case of knowledge. Another, that we don't discuss further in this handout, is that we need to *replace* the justification condition with something else. But we start with a simpler idea.

ADD A 'NO FALSE LEMMAS' CONDITION

Smith doesn't know that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket, we said, because he inferred this belief from a false belief, namely that Jones will get the job. Similarly, he inferred his belief that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona from his belief that Jones owns a Ford. To deal with these two cases, all we need to do is to add an extra condition to the definition of knowledge. You know that *p* if and only if

1. *p* is true
2. you believe that *p*
3. your belief that *p* is justified
4. you did not infer that *p* from a false belief.

Condition (4) is called the 'no false lemmas' condition. A lemma is a claim part way through an argument. For example, Smith concluded that Jones will get the job from being told by the employer; and he then used that information to conclude that the man with ten coins in his pocket will get the job. So 'Jones will get the job' is a lemma.

Condition (4) certainly deals with Gettier's two examples. But it doesn't deal with the underlying worry about truth and justification 'coming apart'. There are Gettier cases that satisfy condition (4) without the person having knowledge.

In her article 'What is knowledge?', Linda Zagzebski describes such a case based on induction. Dr Jones has very good evidence that her patient, Smith, is suffering from virus *X*, e.g. the symptoms and the lab tests are all consistent with Smith having this virus and no other known virus produces these results. Jones therefore believes that Smith has virus *X*, and this belief is justified. However, Smith's symptoms and lab results are caused by Smith having the unknown virus *Y*. But, by chance, Smith has *just* caught virus *X*, so recently that it has not caused any symptoms nor does it show up in lab tests. So Dr Jones' belief that Smith has virus *X* is true. So her belief is both true and justified. But she does not know that Smith has virus *X* because the evidence from which she infers her belief has nothing to do with the fact that Smith has virus *X* as it is all caused by virus *Y*.

This example satisfied condition (4). All the evidence is *true* – Smith does manifest the symptoms he does and the lab reports are accurate. Only the diagnosis is false. So Dr Jones did not infer her true and justified belief that Smith has virus *X* from any false belief, yet it is still not knowledge.

INFALLIBILISM
Gettier has assumed that Smith's beliefs – that Jones will get the job, that he has ten coins in his pocket, that Jones owns a Ford – are justified. Because they are justified, his deductions, that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket and that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona, are justified. But we can challenge Gettier's assumption. While Smith has good reasons for the beliefs from which he starts, but perhaps these reasons aren't enough for justification. If so, then his conclusions will not be justified enough either.

The tripartite definition of knowledge does not tell us what it is for a belief to be justified, although it does not usually require certainty. Infallibilism argues that knowledge is *certain*. One way of combining this with the tripartite view is to say that justification requires certainty. We can say that if a belief is not certain, then it is not justified, or at least, it is not sufficiently justified to count as knowledge. The implication that we should draw from Gettier cases is not that knowledge is not justified true belief, but that our beliefs are rarely sufficiently justified to count as knowledge.

Zagzebski notes that Gettier cases arise because of the gap between truth and justification. The challenge to the tripartite theory is how to bridge that gap. The suggestion of infallibilism is to make justification so strong that it is impossible for

a justified belief to be false. Justification as certainty somehow guarantees the truth of the belief, so truth and justification can't come apart, and Gettier cases become impossible.

What kind of certainty is relevant to knowledge? The *feeling* of certainty won't help. That could vary from one person to another, e.g. you might *feel certain* that God exists or that your friends will never betray you. This kind of certainty is subjective and psychological, a feeling of conviction. But we can all make mistakes, and be certain of something even though what we are certain of is not true. So a feeling of certainty can't guarantee truth. Instead, the kind of certainty involved must relate to the belief being *infallible* in some way. For whatever reason, it is impossible that we could be making a mistake.

With this in mind, here is an argument for infallibilism, the view that we only know a proposition if our belief is infallible:

P1.   No one can know what is false.
C1.   Therefore, if I know that *p*, then I can't be mistaken about *p*.
C2.   Therefore, for justification to secure knowledge, justification must guarantee truth.
C3.   Therefore, if I am justified in believing that *p*, I *can't possibly* be mistaken.
C4.   Therefore, if it is possible that I am mistaken, then I can't be justified in believing that *p*.
C5.   Therefore, infallibilism is true.

Infallibilism defends the tripartite view of knowledge and rules out Gettier cases, because in these cases I do not have *justified* true belief.

But is this a good definition of knowledge? It is rare that the justification of our beliefs rules out the *possibility* of error. Infallibilism entails that we have very little knowledge (even if we still have many beliefs that are very probably true). It also identifies what is *good* or praiseworthy or desirable about knowledge as its infallibility. But is that right? Perhaps it would be better to find a definition of knowledge that allows us more of it and recognises something good about knowledge without seeking immunity to error.

Rejecting the argument for infallibilism
The argument for infallibilism rests on a logical error. (C1) 'If I know that *p*, then I can't be mistaken about *p*', has more than one meaning, depending on how one understands 'can't':

C1a. It can't be the case that if I know that *p*, I *am* mistaken that *p*.

We should agree with this, because of (P1) 'No one can know what is false'.

C1b. If I know that *p*, I *can't possibly* be mistaken that *p*.

This is what infallibilism assumes in moving from (C1) through (C2) to (C3). It is a much stronger claim than (C1a), because it says that not only am I *not* mistaken, but I *can't possibly be* mistaken that *p*. Obviously, there are many cases of

perception or memory in which I *could* be mistaken that *p*, but in fact I am not, and my true belief rests on evidence, so there are good reasons why I am not mistaken.

The argument for infallibilism slips from (C1a), inferred from (P1), to (C1b), used to support (C3). But this is a mistake, confusing one claim for another. The two claims are distinct, since one is a claim about whether I *am* mistaken, and the other is a claim about whether I *could be* mistaken. So the argument fails. To accept infallibilism, we need some other, independent reason to believe (C1b).