

Reliabilism¹

Knowledge is central to life. Without any knowledge at all, we would die, very quickly. At the most basic level, as physical creatures, we want to know where to find food and shelter. We develop technology to help meet these needs and others, so we need to understand how things happen in the world and how we can affect it. As social creatures, we want to live with other people and make arrangements with them. We want to know what people expect, how they feel, or just where to meet on Saturday night. We need to communicate, so we need to know a language. As curious creatures, we simply want to know - how did I come to exist, what am I, how did the universe begin, what is right and wrong, does God exist? In these and countless other ways, knowledge matters to us.

But what is knowledge? One popular theory in the history of philosophy known as the 'tripartite definition' is that it 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.

However, 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. (See the handouts 'The tripartite definition of knowledge' and 'Gettier's objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge' for further discussion of these topics.)

RELIABILISM

Reliabilism rejects the claim that we need justification for knowledge. It claims instead that you know that p if and only if

1. p is true;
2. you believe that p;

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. 55-8

3. your belief is produced by a reliable cognitive process.

A reliable cognitive process is just one that produces a high percentage of true beliefs. Examples include perception, memory and testimony. True beliefs caused by such processes count as knowledge. (Of course, if these processes cause a false belief - if you misperceive or misremember or someone lies to you - then your belief isn't knowledge, but that's because it is false.)

One advantage of reliabilism is that it allows young children and animals to have knowledge. It is odd to say, of many animals, that they have reasons or evidence for their beliefs - they don't have that kind of sophisticated psychology. But they get around the world very well indeed, so it is also odd to deny that they have knowledge. Reliabilism explains both points. Children and animals have knowledge because their true beliefs are caused by reliable processes; whether they have a justification for their beliefs is irrelevant.

In her article 'What is knowledge?', Linda Zagzebski notes that we think knowledge is good; it is desirable and perhaps it is praiseworthy in some sense. Knowledge is undoubtedly good for helping us satisfy our needs and desires (from knowing where the closest supermarket is to finding a cure for cancer); many people have thought that it is also good in itself, irrespective of whether we can use knowledge (e.g. knowing about the origin of the universe). Whatever the reason why knowledge is good, we seek out knowledge for ourselves and support others who do so. We understand that knowledge can be difficult to acquire, requiring motivation or special skills, and we value these.

Lucky or irrational true beliefs are not good in the way knowledge is. They certainly aren't praiseworthy. So knowledge must be more than simply true belief. The tripartite theory explains the goodness of knowledge in terms of justification. Reliabilism, Zagzebski notes, understands knowledge as a 'natural' good, like strength or beauty. It isn't something that is praiseworthy, e.g. we don't deserve credit for having good eyesight, but it is something desirable. Perhaps, in particular, having reliably true beliefs confers a significant benefit on a creature, e.g. it can act in a way that satisfies its desires. This contrasts with the justified true belief theory: Believing something only on good evidence or with good reason is something that we do, something that we can be praised for doing, while believing irrational or without evidence is something that we can be criticised for doing.

A GETTIER CASE FOR RELIABILISM

However, reliabilism doesn't solve Gettier's challenge. Here's another Gettier case, from Alvin Goldman's article 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge'. Henry is driving through the countryside. He doesn't know it, but in this part of the country - call it 'Barn County' - there are lots of fake barns, mere barn facades. But they have been built so that they look just like real barns when seen from the road. As he drives along, Henry often thinks 'There's a barn', or 'Hey, there's another barn'. These beliefs don't count as knowledge because they are false. But just once, Henry thinks 'There's a barn' when he is looking at the one and only real barn in the area. This belief is true. And it is produced by a very reliable

process, namely vision. But it is not knowledge, because - as in other Gettier cases - it is only a matter of luck that Henry's belief is true in this one instance. But reliabilism has to say Henry does know there's a barn. His belief is true and produced by a reliable process. The problem is that in Barn County, this reliable process has produced a true belief in circumstances in which the belief still seems only accidentally true.

Zagzebski provides another example. 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. Diagnosing whether someone suffers from virus X by looking at their symptoms and the results of their lab tests is a reliable process (the diagnosis is correct in a high percentage of cases). Jones therefore believes that Smith has virus X, and this belief is produced by a reliable process. 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 produced by a reliable process. But she does not know that Smith has virus X because the reliable process which causes her belief has nothing to do with the fact that Smith has virus X as it is all caused by virus Y. The reliable process has produced a true belief that is nevertheless not knowledge.

TRUTH AND THE THIRD CONDITION

Both the tripartite view and reliabilism share a common approach to the analysis of knowledge. They claim that knowledge is true belief + some third condition that is closely connected to truth but independent from it - justification or being the product of reliable cognitive processes. As Gettier cases show, the independence of this third condition allows the possibility that it comes apart from truth - that the truth of the belief is lucky, not the result of the third condition.

Zagzebski argues that as long as the third condition is independent of truth like this, no matter how we add to the conditions for knowledge, we will always be able to construct Gettier cases that show that the proposed definition of knowledge is incorrect.

Why does she think this? Because there is a 'recipe' for making up such cases, no matter what the additional conditions are - as long as the additional conditions are independent of truth. Let's call the additional conditions Q (justification, justification + no false lemmas, reliable cognitive processes, etc.), so the proposed definition is that knowledge = true belief that is Q.

1. Start with a belief that is Q but false as a result of 'bad luck', e.g. Henry believes, of a façade in Barn County, that it is a barn.
2. Now add some 'good luck' so that the belief is true after all, e.g. Henry happens to be looking at the one real barn in Barn County.
3. This true belief will be Q, since it is exactly like the false belief that is Q, but happens, by luck, to be true. But it will not be knowledge, because it is true by luck.

4. So for any theory, where Q is independent of truth, knowledge is not true belief + Q.

What if we say knowledge is true belief that is not accidentally true? First, as a definition, this is terrible - it is vague, negative and no help. What is it for a belief to be 'non-accidentally true'? Second, the third condition - that the belief is non-accidentally true - is not independent of truth, so it is no objection to Zagzebski's argument.

The force of her argument is that we need a definition of knowledge that demonstrates both how and why truth and the third condition are connected, and not merely added together. As with justification and reliability, this connection will have something to do with why knowledge is good in a way that mere true belief is not.