

## THE TRIPARTITE DEFINITION OF KNOWLEDGE<sup>1</sup>

In this handout, we discuss the claim, deriving from Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, that knowledge is a belief that is both true and justified. 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).

### WHY JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF?

Why accept the tripartite view and adopt these three conditions for knowledge? In her article, 'What is knowledge?', Linda Zagzebski describes knowledge as a form of cognitive contact with reality. Reality is described or comprised by what is true, not what is false; what is false is precisely what reality isn't. As a result, we can only know what is true. This is a reason to adopt the first condition, that  $p$  is true.

The idea of 'cognitive contact' also motivates the second condition. Propositional knowledge is a relation between the person who has knowledge and the

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<sup>1</sup> 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

proposition that is known. The relation involves the person taking some proposition to be true. Taking a proposition to be true is to believe it. If I take 'eagles are birds' to be true, if I assent to it, then I believe it.

But what is it for a belief is 'justified' and why think knowledge must involve justified belief? One's 'justification' for a belief is what one offers as a reason or evidence to accept it. To understand the importance of justification, we first need to understand that a belief can be true and yet not justified. For example, someone on a jury might think that the person on trial is guilty just from the way they dress. Their belief, that the person is guilty, might be true; but how someone dresses isn't evidence for whether they are a criminal! True beliefs can be formed or held on irrational grounds, for no good reason. Or again true beliefs can just be lucky. For example, there is a lot of evidence that astrology does not make accurate predictions, and my horoscope has often been wrong. Suppose on one occasion, I read my horoscope and believe a prediction, although I know there is evidence against thinking it is right. And then this prediction turns out true!

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.

The examples show that lucky or irrational true beliefs are not good in the way knowledge is. They certainly aren't praiseworthy. The tripartite theory explains this in terms of justification. Justification is what someone takes as their reason or evidence (or other basis) for their belief. In both examples, it is counter-intuitive to say that the belief counts as knowledge, because the person has no reason, no evidence, no justification, for their belief. We ought not to form our beliefs in this way, even if they sometimes turn out true. When we form a belief, we should do so rationally, on the basis of reasons and evidence. If we do, then our belief will be justified. And this belief, if it is also true, says the tripartite theory, will amount to knowledge.

#### A note on certainty

Some philosophers have thought that another difference between knowledge and belief is certainty. Knowledge must be certain; beliefs don't have to be. If a belief isn't certain, then it can't count as knowledge. We can only really know something if we can be certain of it.

But how 'certain' does certainty have to be? The difficulty with defining knowledge as believing a true proposition that it is impossible to doubt is that we end up with very little knowledge indeed. Since we tend to think that we do know all sorts of things that it is possible to doubt, this is clearly not how we usually think about knowledge.

The tripartite theory does not claim that a belief must be certain to be knowledge. To say a belief is justified is not to say that it is certain. We have good reasons to believe many things that it remains possible to doubt.

Of course, some of these beliefs may be false. We are fallible. It is possible to have a false justified belief - many scientific theories that we have now discarded are false, but the evidence available at the time was strong. For example, before Galileo invented the telescope, there was good reason to think that the planets circle the Earth and little evidence that they didn't. But this is why, according to the tripartite view, we must say that knowledge is justified true belief, and not simply justified belief. If some belief that we take to be true turns out to be false, then it is not knowledge. If we discover that it is false, e.g. by uncovering new evidence, then we should give up the claim to know it.

### **ARE THE CONDITIONS INDIVIDUALLY NECESSARY?**

We can raise two kinds of objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge by searching for counterexamples. First, it may be that one of the conditions is not necessary for knowledge - can we have knowledge without justified true belief? Second, it may be that all of the conditions together are still not sufficient for knowledge - can we have justified true belief without knowledge? We discuss only the first question in this handout. For discussion of the second question, see the handout 'Gettier's objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge'.

#### Justification is not a necessary condition of knowledge

Is justification necessary for knowledge, or could knowledge be simply 'true belief'? We can object that sometimes we use the word 'know' just to mean 'believe truly', without worrying about justification. If I ask, 'Do you know who wrote the *Meditations*?', I'm only interested in whether you have the true belief that it was Descartes.

We can understand this in terms of the practical purpose of knowledge. If you can reliably inform me in answer to my query, perhaps that's enough for practical purposes to talk of knowledge. But this won't do as a definition for theoretical purposes. In particular, as we saw above, it fails to capture what is good about knowledge, since true belief can be formed and held in both good ways and bad. If you don't have a good reason for believing that Descartes wrote the *Meditations*, then the mere fact that your belief is true doesn't make it knowledge.

However, even if true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, that doesn't mean that justification is a necessary condition. There may be some other condition that turns true belief into knowledge.

#### Truth is not a necessary condition of knowledge

We connected the idea that knowledge involves truth to Zagzebski's claim that knowledge is cognitive contact with reality. What 'reality' is, is an issue in metaphysics. And the question of what we should mean by 'truth' can become quite a challenging one. Nevertheless, we can make some important points on whether a definition of knowledge should include mention of truth, whatever truth turns out to be.

Could knowledge be simply justified belief? In an everyday sense, it is difficult to see how. Justified beliefs can be true or false. People can believe propositions that aren't true. For example, someone may claim that flamingos are grey, and think that they know this. They could even be justified, e.g. their science teacher told them, and they saw a grey picture of a flamingo in a textbook. But they are mistaken: flamingos are not grey, but pink. Of course, they believe that flamingos are grey, they may even be certain that flamingos are grey. But given the idea that knowledge involves cognitive contact with reality, a false belief is not knowledge. You can't know something false, or so it seems.

### *Relativism about truth*

What if many people, perhaps a whole society, share a particular false belief and have good reasons for doing so? For instance, almost everybody used to believe that the Earth is flat. It does, after all, look that way. Should we say that people used to know that the Earth is flat? Or should we say that they didn't know it, they only believed it, because their belief was false?

One response to this line of thought is to adopt some form of relativism. We reject talking about 'truth' without qualification, and talk instead about what is 'true for' someone or some society. Knowledge could still be justified true belief, but because what is 'true' is relative to someone or some society, knowledge is also relative.

Let us assume that the belief that the Earth is flat was justified. Is there any sense in which we can say that this belief was 'true for' people in the past? To say it was 'true for them' must be to say more than simply that they believed it. We all agree they believed it, but to believe that some proposition is true is not the same as the proposition being true. If all it takes to make something true is to believe, then the best cure for cancer is simply to believe that one doesn't have cancer! If there is no difference between a belief and a true belief, then how does anyone get less than 100% on any exam? To make sense of our lives, we must allow that beliefs can be true or false. So for a belief to be 'true for' someone, this can't simply mean that they believe it. So what does it mean?

A second difficulty arises with the idea of 'true for': If we say that it was true, for people in the past, that Earth is flat, and it is true for us now that the Earth is a sphere, the question arises how both of these claims about the Earth can be true. Did the Earth miraculously change from being flat to being a sphere? Did a change in people's beliefs change the shape of the Earth? No one believes that.

Perhaps we can defend relativism by giving up all talk of truth (and perhaps all talk of 'reality'), and restrict ourselves to talking about what people believe. Knowledge is simply justified belief. We cannot ask 'what shape is the Earth (truly)?', we can only ask 'what shape is the Earth ('for us')?'. There is no 'objective truth' about the shape of the Earth.

However, it seems hard to resist the claim that the modern view of the shape of the Earth is closer to the truth than the ancient theory. For instance, we have more evidence, e.g. photos from space, than they did. To make the claim that our

beliefs are true while those of some other culture are false is not to say that their beliefs were unjustified or irrational or unintelligent. We are discussing truth, not justification, and the evidence available to people changes over time. Nor is it to say that our beliefs are certain or infallible.

The response that no one knows the shape of the Earth because we could be mistaken is irrelevant - it retreats from relativism to scepticism, a completely different view. To allow that we could be mistaken assumes that there is some non-relative truth! To claim that 'there is a truth that we don't know' is very different from claiming that 'there is no objective truth and what we know is relative to society'.

### Belief is not a necessary condition of knowledge

There are two strengths of the objection that belief is not necessary for knowledge. The weak objection is that sometimes it is possible to know something without believing it. The strong objection is that knowledge is never a form of belief.

The weak objection: suppose John is sitting an exam, but he's very nervous and has no confidence in his answers. Suppose when answering 'Which philosopher wrote the *Meditations*?', he writes 'Descartes'. He's right, and the answer isn't a lucky guess - he has remembered what he learned. So it is plausible to say that John knows the answer, he knows more than he thinks - he's just unconfident. But because he's unconfident, we should say that John doesn't believe that the answer is Descartes. So he knows the answer without believing it.

We can defend the tripartite definition by replying in one of two ways. We could say that John doesn't know the answer. Although there is a sense in which he remembers the answer, because he doesn't 'commit' to the answer that occurs to him, he doesn't believe what he remembers. Alternatively, we could say that John does know that the answer is 'Descartes', because he believes this, although this belief is unconscious or 'tacit'. This unconscious belief amounts to knowledge.

In the *Republic*, Plato presents arguments for the claim that knowledge is never belief. What is a matter of belief is not known, and what is matter of knowledge is not believed. Instead, belief and knowledge involve different 'faculties' and take different 'objects'. He appeals to the connection between knowledge, truth and reality to make the case. First, knowledge is infallible, because you cannot know what is false. But beliefs, however, can be mistaken. Belief and knowledge have different powers. So belief cannot be knowledge. Second, knowledge is only of what is real. We cannot have knowledge of what is not real or does not exist. Knowledge is 'about' what is real. By contrast, ignorance relates to what is not real, what does not exist, i.e. 'nothing'. If you are completely ignorant of something, you don't think of it at all; if you don't understand it, you can't form an opinion about its reality. If there is something between what is real and what is not real (e.g. what is constantly changing from one thing to another), then there must be something between knowledge and ignorance. This is belief - neither knowledge nor ignorance. Belief and knowledge have different objects.

Plato argues that we may divide reality into the realm of the 'sensible' - what we detect through our senses - and the realm of the 'intelligible' - what we discover using the intellect. Belief relates to the former, knowledge to the latter. So we form beliefs about the changeable, natural world; but we gain knowledge - using reasoning in mathematics and philosophy - of abstract things, like numbers and concepts.

As Zagzebski notes, almost everyone now agrees that Plato is wrong to distinguish belief and knowledge as he does. First, knowledge and belief need not be different faculties even if knowledge is always true and belief is not. This difference isn't a result of different 'powers', but because knowledge is always true and justified belief, whereas belief in general can be true or false, justified or unjustified.

Second, belief and knowledge do not need to be about different things. Because what is known is always true, you cannot know something that goes from true to false. Plato seems to try to explain this by saying that we can only know about things that cannot change. But a different explanation is to separate the truth that is known from the object by talking about truth at a time or in a context. For example, I can know that a particular object of sense experience - this book - has a particular property, e.g. it is a certain size. Yet its size can change, for example if you burn it. What I know is that the book is this size now (at a specific moment in time), and this truth won't change even if the size of the book changes. Plato seems to have confused a property about knowledge (the truth of the proposition known doesn't change) with a property about the object of knowledge (it doesn't change).