

The conceptual analysis of knowledge

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I thank Eric Campbell for sharing lecture notes on this topic. Some of what follows draws heavily on his notes.

- analyzing the concept of “knowledge” is a central task epistemology
- different uses of “know”
 - “I know Angelina”, “I know your cell phone number”
 - “I know how to grill a mean steak” (**knowing how**)
 - “I know that 7 is a prime number”, “I know that the Steelers won the Superbowl in 2009” (**knowing that**)

In this course, we are only interested in this last kind of knowledge, so-called **propositional knowledge** (or **factual knowledge**).

What does “analyzing the concept” mean?

- All the contributors to this debate are relying on are **judgments**, or what are sometimes called **intuitions**, about whether something is knowledge or not.
- What they are interested in is our (hopefully shared) **concept** of knowledge in order to make their arguments. It is only our “concept” of something that is being investigated (by “analyzing” it).
- They are **not** (or shouldn't be) saying that there is a matter of objective fact about what knowledge *really* is. At least, that's not the objective of conceptual analysis.
- conceptual analysis \neq empirical or scientific investigation

Necessary and sufficient conditions

- In analyzing concepts, philosophers often take themselves to be looking for **definitions** of the concepts.
- Definitions are given by stating the **necessary and sufficient conditions** for the concept to apply.
- A **necessary condition** is something that *has to be* in place for the concept to apply, i.e. it is a *requirement*.
- Most philosophers think that it is necessary that a belief be **true** in order for it to count as knowledge. On this view, no belief that is not true qualifies as knowledge.
- A **sufficient condition** is one that is *enough* for the concept to apply.
- Most people would think that seeing a familiar object very clearly in the plain light of day at close range while entirely sober is sufficient to know that it is really there. (Some philosophers doubt this, but they will be the topic of the next lectures.)

Historical prelude: Plato and justified, true belief

References: *Theaetetus* (201), *Meno* (98).

- Socrates, in the *Theaetetus*, asked why knowledge is better than true opinion
 - Suppose you wanted to know something (e.g. directions to the gym, the answer to an exam question, what is the morally right thing to do, etc.).
 - Would you rather ask someone who knows, or someone with a true opinion? Does it make a difference?
- ⇒ Two questions:
- ① What is the difference between knowledge and true opinion?
 - ② Why, if at all, is knowledge more valuable?
- Socrates offers a metaphor in response to both questions: knowledge, he said, was like **Daedalus's statues** once they were tied down

- Daedalus was a magical statue-maker and his statues, if not tied down, would fly away.
- Knowledge = true belief that is “tied down”, or true opinion with an account (*logos*)
- modern (approximate) rendering: knowledge is **justified, true belief**
- And therein lies why knowledge is more valuable as well: Our true opinions must be “tether[ed] with chains of reasons why,” else they will fly away like the statues of Daedalus.
- received view for most of the history of philosophy: knowledge as “justified, true belief”

Analysis (Standard Analysis of Knowledge)

A subject S knows that p if and only if (i) S believes that p , (ii) p is true, and (iii) S is justified in believing that p .

Sir Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989): logical positivism



- *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936)
- brought ideas of logical positivist movement from Vienna and Berlin to English-speaking world
- logical positivism: empiricism and verificationism

Ayer and the right to be sure that p

Analysis (Ayer's Analysis of Knowledge)

Ayer's necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge are

- 1 *the belief must be true*
- 2 *one must be sure of it*
- 3 *one must have the right to be sure of it*

⇒ Ayer's analysis differs from the standard one. However, he is sometimes read (e.g. by Gettier) as defending the Standard Analysis, or something rather close to it.

Edmund L Gettier (*1927)



- PhD Cornell, taught at U Mass, Amherst
- reputation based on single three-page essay entitled “Is justified true belief knowledge?”, published in *Analysis* **23** (1963): 121-23
- his famous counterexamples to the Standard Analysis pose a significant challenge to the latter

Two kinds of counterexamples

To any conceptual analysis, counterexamples can take two forms:

- 1 Show that the definition is **too broad**:
 - Find a case that satisfies the conditions of the definition, but of which we would not think as a case of knowledge.
- 2 Show that the definition is **too narrow**:
 - Find a case of which we think it constitutes an instance of knowledge, but which fails to qualify according to the definition.

Gettier's counterexamples are of the first kind, i.e. they qualify as cases of knowledge as far as the Standard Analysis is concerned, but should intuitively not be counted as cases of knowledge.

IOW, these counterexamples aim to show that justified, true belief is **not sufficient** for knowledge.

The structure of the Gettier cases

- It is possible to be justified in believing that which is false.
- If someone is justified in believing a proposition p , and p entails another proposition q , and that person deduces q from p and believes it on the basis of that valid deduction, then they are justified in believing q .
- Suppose (i) a subject S has such a justified, but mistaken, belief p , (ii) p entails q , (iii) S understands this entailment, and thus (iv) believes q on the basis of this understanding and her belief in p . Finally, suppose (v) that, for reasons unknown to S , q is accidentally true.
- In this case, (a) q is true, (b) S believes that q is true, and (c) S is justified in believing that q is true.
- However, S **does not know that q** .

Let's look at Gettier's Case II (my version)

- Suppose Alice has very strong evidence that Brenda works at UCSD, i.e. she has strong evidence for the proposition
b: Brenda works at UCSD.
- Suppose Alice has another friend, Catherine, of whose whereabouts she has no idea. Alice randomly picks a location to suit her fancy, and builds the following proposition
c: Either Brenda works at UCSD, or Catherine is in Barcelona.
- The rules of logic tell us that *c* is entailed by *b*, and suppose Alice took Phil 10 and knows this.
- In Phil 10, Alice also learnt that for *c* to be true, it suffices that one of its parts (or “disjuncts”) is true. Thus, she proceeds to accept *c* as true on the basis of *b* and the entailment relation.
- Since she has correctly inferred *c* from *b*, a proposition for whose truth she has excellent evidence, **she is thus justified in believing *c*.**

- Suppose now that two further conditions obtain:
 - ① In fact, Brenda just quit her job at UCSD, thus rendering b false (and Alice doesn't know this).
 - ② By sheer coincidence, Catherine has developed a recent interest in Catalan culture and has, on short notice, decided to spend spring break in Barcelona, thus still making c true.
- ⇒ Alice does not **know** that c is true.
- But (i) c is true, (ii) Alice believes it to be true and (iii) she is also justified in so believing.
- ⇒ The conditions stated in the definition of knowledge according to the Standard Analysis are **insufficient** for knowledge.

Michael Clark: full grounding

Michael Clark, "Knowledge and grounds: A comment on Mr. Gettier's paper", *Analysis* 24 (1963): 46-8.

- Clark's proposal: add condition that S 's belief that p must be "fully grounded"
 - **full grounding**: there are no false beliefs in the entire justificatory chain leading S to believe that p
 - In particular: proposition b above was false (since Brenda no longer works at UCSD), but it is certainly in the chain of reasons Alice has for believing that c .
- ⇒ Alice doesn't know c on Clark's analysis **because it is not fully grounded** (it's inferred from a false belief).

Many more proposals have been made how to deal w/ Gettier cases, but we stop here (except for Goldman's externalist story that we will encounter when we return to justification later in the term).