Introducing 'Applicable Knowledge' as a Challenge to the Attainment of Absolute Knowledge

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Abstract

Whilst scholars of Epistemology have long attempted to shape the definition of absolute knowledge, skeptics have doubted both the proposed definitions and the possibility of attainment. Indeed, the centuries-long epistemological debate spanning platonic literature and contemporary debate, has been fruitful in providing extended definitions of knowledge. The present paper poses a concrete and deductive challenge - derived from Foundationalism, Deductive Logic and Redundancy Theory - to both the contemporarily accepted Gettier definition and to the classical suggestion of the existence of achievable absolute knowledge. In order to contextualise the challenge and contribution of this paper, a concrete analysis of the classical, modern, and contemporary epistemological definitions of knowledge are presented

Introduction

The definition of knowledge has long been disputed, and the ability to achieve knowledge has been universally doubted by skeptics. The writings of Plato suggest that knowledge is True Belief. However, analysis of the consequences of such a definition proves this to be insufficient. In this paper, I will propose that knowledge in absolute form is unattainable, and to achieve what I shall call 'applicable knowledge', conditions of 'pragmatism' and 'justification' are necessary additions. First, I will analyse the definition of True Belief. Secondly I shall introduce, and argue against, the sufficiency of Justified True Belief as a definition of knowledge. Lastly, I shall integrate ideas from Foundationalism, Deductive Logic and Redundancy Theory to add my philosophical insights on the attainability of absolute knowledge and to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an 'applicable knowledge'.

True Belief - Correspondence Theory and Coherence Theory definitions - Plato, Aristotelian Universals, Correspondence Theory and Coherence Theory (Moore and Russell)

By virtue of definition, a philosophical analysis of knowledge - what knowledge consists of, and what its limitations entail - demands that the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge be fully understood. Plato's Theaetetus (Plato, 360 B.C.E, 187A-210B) proposed that such a condition for knowledge is 'True Belief'. Yet simply stating the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge as being 'True Belief', does not constitute understanding; the definitions of 'belief' and 'truth' themselves remain disputable. Hence, for the purpose of clarification and understanding, the definitions of these terms in relation to their usage in this paper, is now explained. In commonplace language, 'belief' may signify a form of a strong conviction, such as a belief in God. Philosophically, however, belief is regarded as the acceptance of the truth of a proposition, a fact, or a statement. In a consistent belief system, the acceptance of such propositions, facts, and statements as true provide for their negation to be false. Hence, given that belief in the truth of a proposition P is part of such a consistent group of beliefs, a belief exists that affirms non-P as false. Plato states that for a belief to be considered knowledge, the belief

must be true. Many theories provide definitions for truth; the two most influential being Correspondence Theory and Coherence Theory. Correspondence theory in its strictest form is often associated with the works of Moore and Russell, and states that P is true if and only if every element of P is associated with reality. Therefore, according to correspondence theory, an association between P and reality is both a necessary and sufficient condition for truth. Yet, empirically intangible ideas such as platonic ideas (forms), nouns and verbs, and Aristotelian Universals (Føllesdal, 1994) are often too different from our perception of reality for them to be considered related or true. Hence, less strict forms of correspondence theory exist in which something is true if only associated with a fact; given the consistence of a belief system, something is false if its negation can be associated with a fact. In relation to the Social Constructivist view, Coherence Theory states that something is true if it coheres to more truths than do competing propositions. Hence in illustration, Plato's beliefs in the geocentric theory were true, just as Galileo's beliefs in the heliocentric theory were true, as each theory provided more support than its predecessors and resulted in a more consistent relation between itself and further truths. Similarly, Dr David Whitehouse from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is acting truthfully in headlining that "Laws of physics may change" (Whitehouse, 2002). Naturally, no two contradictory truths exist consistently within the same system at a given time, instead truths are replaced. Hence, the True Belief Theory of Knowledge states that knowledge is the acceptance of the truth of a proposition, a fact, or a statement which in turn is externally true - in Coherent, Correspondence, or an equally compatible theory of truth. Yet, the True Belief Theory of knowledge is not suited for absolute knowledge.

Criticisms of True Belief as theory of knowledge - empiricism, relativism and coincidence

The True Belief Theory of knowledge is ideal in defining such knowledge as Intuitive Knowledge (Locke, Husserl, Spinoza), yet remains inadequate in providing a definition for Absolute Knowledge. When applied, the results of the theory are inconsistent and unreliable, lead to naïve realism, and are subject to empirical deception. True Belief Theory fails in that, by accepting subjective perception as an inherited objective property of the object

being perceived, it introduces inconsistency to the theory. Although Plato distinguished perception of an object from the object itself, his early attempts were mainly aimed at refuting the Sophist claims of relativism rather than directly impacting True Belief Theory. 'Perspective', for example, illustrates criticism of True Belief Theory. True Belief Theory would accept the objective truth of perspective. Perspective would mean that a road does actually get smaller as it disappears into the distance and that twenty degrees centigrade is always hot. Furthermore, dual subjective perceptions allow for dual objective truths, both of which may be contradictory to each other. For example, two students may observe an orange from different distances, thus concluding that the same orange is of different volumes in the same space and time; yet Leibniz's Law says that if two objects are one and the same thing, then they have to have all the same properties (Guttenplan, 1994, p.431). Hence, an orange may only have one objective size, yet the True Belief theory proposes that many sizes may exist uniquely in one place and time. A similar problem, related to the deception of the empirical senses, is the concept of self deception. Under the True Belief Theory, a strong conviction that a belief is true, whether it is true or not, leads to the formation of knowledge (Morris, 1999, p.44). Further difficulty arises when a belief may be perceived as true because the truth of the belief occurs as a coincidence rather than for reasons propelling the belief, thus maintaining apparent and not genuine truth. The following example illustrates this need for the addition of explicit justification: a student believes that a philosophy assignment is due on Monday. The implicit reason for the belief, which is only known to the student (and not considered in the True Belief Theory) being that Monday is the date that other universities have set as a due date. Yet, it is conceivable that, by coincidence, Monday is the true date when the student's philosophy assignment is due; however, this is not the same assignment which was referred to in the students' belief. Can it thus be stated that the student had knowledge that his or her assignment was due on Monday, even though the evidence for the belief was not related to the truth of the belief? The claim to knowledge which arises is questionable. In Letters to Luciliu, Seneca writes that "luck never made a man wise" (Seneca, c. 4 BC-AD 65); to avoid such misconceptions of knowledge, two further conditions need to be adjoined to this definition of True Belief.

Explanation and criticism of 'Justified True Belief' as a definition of Knowledge, Ambiguities of justification - Evidential and Deontological justifications , Gettier, conclusive reason (Dretske), causal condition (Goldman), defeasibility condition (Lehrer and Paxson)

Many of the difficulties which arise in defining knowledge with the True Belief theory can be solved by adding the further necessary condition of justification. Hence, a 'justified' true belief is said to be equivalent to knowledge; Subject S can be said to know proposition P, if and only if S believes P, P is true, and S is justified in believing that P is true. Such a definition is commonly called the 'tripartite definition'. Consider the example of the philosophy assignment above. If the student had stated why s/he believed that the assignment was due on Monday, it could clearly be concluded that the student did not have knowledge; the justification of the student did not match that of reality. However, one criticism of this tripartite definition is that Justification is ambiguous: it can be equally-well defined through both the Evidential and Deontological forms of the word. Evidential Justification consists of holding enough evidence to support a belief. For example, a student may believe that his or her university is open, and justify such a belief with the observation that lectures are in progress. Similarly, Milo reasons that 'Socrates is mortal' on the basis that 'all men are mortal' and that 'Socrates is a man' (Milo, 1996). It can be seen from my two examples that beliefs may be 'eventually' justified through induction and, like Foundationalism, are then based upon the acceptance of other facts. In common language use, one may state that a person "was not justified in" acting in a certain way. Deontological justification is comparable to the linguistic use of justification in that it is associated with a sense of responsibility, duty, and obligation (Sudduth, 2002). Deontological justification embodies the problems of evidential justification, but introduces a further problem of 'intellectual obligation' and problems of assuming two-state logic for beliefs. Deontological justification states that an intellectual obligation to hold a belief exists if adequate evidence is available for the belief to be evidentially justified; if there is not enough evidence, however, the obligation not to hold a belief exists. The view that knowledge is justified true belief has been widely supported by philosophers. Ayer, who supported deontological justified true belief, said that one has knowledge if one has the right to be sure that a belief is true (Ayer, 1956, p. 34). Chisholm,

who endorsed the evidential claim of justification, stated that acquiring adequate evidence for true belief is a necessary and sufficient condition of knowledge (Chisholm, 1957, p. 16). Yet, despite the more recent introduction and use of the term, the first occurrence of the concept of Justified True Belief Theory is arguably found in Plato's Meno (Gettier, 1963, p. 1). Plato expanded upon Socrates' search for definition (precision) and writes that knowledge is "a true belief that is tied down" (Plato, 380 BC, 29). To illustrate 'tied down', Plato writes of the statue of Daedalus. It is conceivable that through the concept 'tied down', Plato was attempting to articulate the term justified (Gettier, 1963, p. 1). Yet, it is equally conceivable that Plato's intention in illustrating the concept 'tied down' was to refer to a fact which holds the objective property of truth: an absolute truth, or truth which cannot be said to be false in a given condition. Whether Plato was an advocate of Justified True Belief Theory, or whether he simply accepted the Theory is arguable.

The tripartite definition also fails in completely defining knowledge. The Justified True Belief Theory is a foundational theory: it bases the condition of justification upon the given validity of other beliefs. If, and only if, the foundational beliefs are, in turn, knowledge can the Justified True Belief Theory be considered to define knowledge. Hence, according to the Justified True Belief Theory, knowledge is not acquired if the belief upon which the justification is based is false (Gettier, 1963, p. 3). Gettier provides an example in which a person named Smith believes that Jones will get a job, and he also knows that Jones has ten coins in his pocket (Gettier, 1963, p. 2). Hence, Smith is led to believe that the person who will get the job will also have 10 coins in his or her pocket. Then, Smith is eventually hired for the job, and Smith also has ten coins in his pocket. Although Smith's belief that the person who would get the job has ten coins in his or her pocket is true, Smith cannot make a claim to knowledge as the premise for his belief was false: Smith had justified true belief, yet did not have knowledge. Similarly, a student may claim that there is a conference in Assembly Hall, justify his belief by observing a signpost saying that such a conference is in progress, and find that there is in fact a conference in Assembly Hall. However, it is conceivable that the signpost made reference to an earlier conference, and had not been removed. Hence, the student belief was true and justified while he did not have knowledge. Many philosophers have attempted to add further conditions to

the Justified True Belief Theory in an attempt to define knowledge. As yet, as far as I am aware, no published refutation to Gettier fully encompasses all cases of knowledge. Note that these examples exploit coincidence and, like the example of the student's philosophy paper above, illustrate the need to add explicit justification to true belief. Fred Dretske, for example, proposed a 'conclusive reason' condition such that a person knows something if and only if the justification for the true belief exists in that it would be false if the belief were false (Dretske, 1971, pp. 1-22). That is, he proposed a reason for the justification should exist such that, given the truth of the reason, it is circumstantially impossible for the belief to be false. Using the Gettier example, if Smith was not hired for the job and did not have ten coins in his pocket, it is still conceivable that Jones can be hired and that Jones does have ten coins in his pocket. Hence, there is no conclusive connection between the reason and the belief which it supports. Although conclusive reason does solve the Geitter problem, many counter-examples exist which prove that the 'conclusive reason' is not a necessary condition for knowledge. Pappas and Swain provided a counter example where S sees a cup on a table (Pappas and Swain, 1978, pp. 41-60). Yet, the cup which S sees is only a hologram and the real cup (which is being used to create the hologram) is elsewhere. Since S is using only visual justification for the cup being on the table, S is unaware that it is a hologram. The condition that S would not have the experience of seeing the cup unless there actually was a cup on the table is false. Yet S still maintains the knowledge of knowing that there is a cup, and this knowledge is true as the cup making the hologram does exist. Therefore, S knows that 'there is a cup' even though the reason for justification is not a conclusive reason. Thus, it is possible for S to know something (P) without 'Conclusive Reasons'. Further refutations to Gettier also fail in particular circumstances. The 'causal condition', proposed by Alvin Goldman, states that knowledge is justified true belief in which the belief must maintain an "appropriate" causal connection to the claimed knowledge (Goldman, 1967, pp. 335-372). Goldman defines appropriate as a combination of perception, memory, and casual events in an attempt to redefine the 'causal chain'. As applied in the earlier example that S assumes that there is a conference in Assembly Hall because a signpost indicated a past conference, Goldman would assert that S should have no claim to knowledge as viewing the signpost has no causal connection with the reality of the conference. Yet, knowledge can exist without a causal consideration added to justified true belief. As a further attempted refutation to Gettier, Keith Lehrer and

Thomas D. Paxson argued for the 'Defeasibility Condition' to be added to the justified true belief definition of knowledge. The defeasibility condition states that if there is no true proposition - or, as Lehrer wrote, "defeater" - which would falsify the justification for the belief, then knowledge can be claimed. Similar to 'relative truths' of Coherence Theory, a justified true belief is knowledge unless the truth of the belief is countered by the truth of another belief (Philosophy Online, 2002). Furthermore, the defeasibility condition is not a fallacy of ad ignorantiam (Copi, 1998, p. 212), as Lehrer's definition of knowledge allows for the replacement of truths. Therefore, I conclude that such a definition is not well suited for absolute knowledge, but rather for 'relative knowledge', or knowledge which changes over time - such as the knowledge that the earth is flat, or the geocentric theory. As far as I am aware, no published refutation to Gettier has successfully amended the Justified True Belief Theory allowing a definition of absolute knowledge.

Acceptable Knowledge - Pragmatism vs. Ideal Coherence Theory (Descartes, Godel, Ramsey and Zacharyas Bastick)

Due to flaws in the Justified True Belief Theory (Gettier, 1963, p. 3), I now propose a final necessary pragmatic condition be added to the theory in order to define an 'applicable knowledge'. Applicable knowledge is belief which is justified and truthful only to a necessary level of pragmatic consideration. This form of knowledge is self-satisfying in that it allows for beliefs to be considered as given, and for the further growth of applicable knowledge through Foundationalism. To clarify this concept, I shall first use Foundationalism to defeat the Socratic claim that absolute knowledge is practically attainable. The theory of Foundationalism itself is central in Dretske, Goldman, and Lehrer's responses to Gettier as well as to the tripartite definition itself. Knowledge can be assumed if and only if the foundational 'truths' used in justification of a belief are given. Yet, what truths can be assumed as given and, when identified, how can such truths be justified? In an attempt to identify absolute truths upon which other truths could be based, Descartes published a test for absolute knowledge (formally known as Descartes' Test) in his Meditations on First Philosophy. Descartes analysed categorized beliefs and "if... able to find in each [category] some reason to doubt [a belief], this will

suffice to justify rejection of the whole [category]" (Descartes, 1641, Meditation I). Through this method, Descartes rejected all beliefs as not being absolute knowledge except for the belief in the existence of himself. I shall now show the fallacy in Descartes' conclusion. Descartes' conclusion, "I think therefore I am", assumes an association between the self and the thinking which occurs. Yet, it is conceivable that, largely due to more recent theological concepts on disembodied deities, thinking can occur without a 'self'. In refutation to my position, it may be argued that the self is not necessarily the body but the container of the thinking - the entity allowing the thinking to occur. Similarly, thought need not be a product of an existent entity, in the same way as manufactured goods may be the results of myriad distributed temporal processes that cannot be defined as an entity. Such a refutation fails to acknowledge that Descartes can only be sure of the thinking, and that alone does not justify the existence of a container. The existence of the self is not a necessary container of thought and thought could be self-containing. Therefore, Descartes' statement only holds true in the limited and tautological sense that 'thinking allows for the existence of thinking'. Descartes proposed that existence of the self was absolute knowledge. This, I have here disproved. Given the invalidity of Descartes' proof for the existence of the self, it follows that we cannot accept his proof of absolute knowledge. Furthermore, absolute truth cannot be acquired from within a consistent system of beliefs (Godel, 1940). Thus, logic - which is often used as 'laws of thought' (Hospers, 2000, pp. 55-59) - is an unsavoury approach for attempting to find Evidential justification for a belief, as concrete deductive logic does no more than make implicit knowledge explicit by re-phrasing truths, not by forming new ones. In this respect, logic acts similarly to loosely interpret correspondence theory, which states that truth simply 'says things as they are' (Lacey, 2001, p. 358). F.P Ramsey's Redundancy Theory advocates this view by tautologically stating that to call something true is simply to repeat what it says (Lacey, 2001, p. 359). Hence, logic analyzes consistency which, as Coherence Theory presupposes, and Godel's incompleteness theorems have shown (Godel, 1940), is not equivalent to truth. As logic is not a tool for justification, and since knowledge cannot be acquired from within a system of influence, the ability to acquire foundational knowledge seems questionable. Furthermore, Idealists holding Coherence Theory believe that only a system taken as a whole is true: propositions within a system supply only partial truth (Lacey, 2001, p. 359). Yet, since one cannot know whether something belongs to the widest coherent system - a self-containing system - foundational

knowledge is unattainable. With no foundations upon which to build further absolute knowledge, one must be satisfied with something less. The condition of 'pragmatic justification' allows for something less in that it supposes the acceptance of belief as knowledge lies in observable and practical use. Thus, the 'pragmatic' as well as 'justified' conditions need to be added to 'True Belief' in order to form 'acceptable knowledge'.

Conclusion

Given that True Belief theory requires the acceptance of a belief which is either fully associable with reality or is logically consistent with a wider system of views, True Belief cannot be justly argued as a definition for knowledge. The results of such a theory are inconsistent and unreliable, subject to empirical deception, and lead to naïve realism. The relativist view that subjective perception is thought to be an inherited objective property of an object contravenes Leibniz's Law in that it results in dual objective definitions for single objects. Since truth can occur simultaneously with belief, while not due to causal relation, two further necessary conditions of 'justification' and 'pragmatism' need to be added in order to form knowledge. Ayer, Chisholm, and, arguably, Plato were proponents of the tripartite definition of Justified True Belief. Such a view became accepted for defining belief until Edmund Gettier's publication of 'Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?' (Gettier, 1963), in which he notes that while the Justified True Belief theory holds necessary conditions, it does not hold sufficient conditions for knowledge. Many refutations and attempts to redefine knowledge have since been attempted (Dretske, 1971; Goldman, 1967; Lehrer, 1971), yet none have been completely successful. Justified True Belief - whether combined with the 'Conclusive Reasons' condition, 'Causal' conditions, or the 'Defeasibility' condition does not provide the definition of knowledge. In a further attempt to identify knowledge, Descartes hoped to find absolute knowledge which could become the foundation for future knowledge. The Descartes' Test claimed to prove absolute knowledge existed, namely knowledge of the self. My analysis found Descartes' claim to be false and that such a test can only claim tautological truth by what Ramsey (Lacey, 2001, p. 359) refers to as 'truth that is simply redundant repetition'. Furthermore, I have argued that

truth cannot be justified through the laws of logic and have noted the views of Godel that complete truth can only exist within a complete system (Godel, 1940). Due to the practical impossibility of finding all the causes and consequences of a system, finding the largest system is itself a practically impossible task; this statement itself being a pragmatic approximation to the ideal of absolute knowledge. Hence, I conclude that attaining absolute knowledge is an impossible task. I have thus proposed that pragmatism must temper absolute justification of true belief in order to form what I have called 'applicable knowledge' as the only knowledge we can attain and of which this paper is, but, an example.

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