

The Nature of Propositional Knowledge : A Review

Dr. Surender Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Govt., Ripudaman College Nabha Punjab

Abstract : Having narrowed our focus to propositional knowledge, we must ask ourselves what, exactly, constitutes knowledge. What does it mean for someone to know something? What is the difference between someone who



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knows something and someone else who does not know it, or between something one knows and something one does not know? Since the scope of knowledge is so broad, we need a general characterization of knowledge, one which is applicable to any kind of proposition whatsoever. Epistemologists have usually undertaken this task by seeking a correct and complete analysis of the concept of knowledge, in other words a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions which determine whether someone knows something.

A. Belief

Let us begin with the observation that knowledge is a mental state; that is, knowledge exists in one's mind, and unthinking things cannot know anything. Further, knowledge is a specific kind of mental state. While "that"-clauses can also be used to describe desires and intentions, these cannot constitute knowledge. Rather, knowledge is a kind of belief. If one has no beliefs about a particular matter, one cannot have knowledge about it.

For instance, suppose that I desire that I be given a raise in salary, and that I intend to do whatever I can to earn one. Suppose further that I am doubtful as to whether I will indeed be given a raise, due to the intricacies of the university's budget and such. Given that I do not believe that I will be given a raise, I cannot be said to know that I will. Only if I am inclined to believe something can I come to know it. Similarly, thoughts that an individual has never entertained are not among his beliefs, and thus cannot be included in his body of knowledge.

Some beliefs, those which the individual is actively entertaining, are called occurrent beliefs. The majority of an individual's beliefs are non-occurrent; these are beliefs that the individual has in the background but is not entertaining at a particular time. Correspondingly, most of our knowledge is non-occurrent, or background, knowledge; only a small amount of one's knowledge is ever actively on one's mind.

B. Truth

Knowledge, then, requires belief. Of course, not all beliefs constitute knowledge. Belief is necessary but not sufficient for knowledge. We are all sometimes mistaken in what we believe; in other words, while some of our beliefs are true, others are false. As we try to acquire knowledge, then, we are trying to increase our stock of true beliefs (while simultaneously minimizing our false beliefs).

C. Justification

Knowledge, then, requires factual belief. However, this does not suffice to capture the nature of knowledge. Just as knowledge requires successfully achieving the objective of true belief, it also requires success with regard to the formation of that belief. In other words, not all true beliefs constitute knowledge; only true beliefs arrived at in the right way constitute knowledge.

What, then, is the right way of arriving at beliefs? In addition to truth, what other properties must a belief have in order to constitute knowledge? We might begin by noting that sound reasoning and solid evidence seem to be the way to acquire knowledge. By contrast, a lucky guess cannot constitute knowledge. Similarly, misinformation and faulty reasoning do not seem like a recipe for knowledge, even if they happen to lead to a true belief. A belief is said to be justified if it is obtained in the right way. While justification seems, at first glance, to be a matter of a belief's being based on evidence and reasoning rather than on luck or misinformation, we shall see that there is much disagreement regarding how to spell out the details.

The requirement that knowledge involve justification does not necessarily mean that knowledge requires absolute certainty, however. Humans are fallible beings, and fallibilism is the view that it is possible to have knowledge even when one's true belief might have turned out to be false. Between beliefs which were necessarily true and those which are true solely by luck lies a

spectrum of beliefs with regard to which we had some defeasible reason to believe that they would be true. For instance, if I heard the weatherman say that there is a 90% chance of rain, and as a result I formed the belief that it would rain, then my true belief that it would rain was not true purely by luck. Even though there was some chance that my belief might have been false, there was a sufficient basis for that belief for it to constitute knowledge. This basis is referred to as the justification for that belief. We can then say that, to constitute knowledge, a belief must be both true and justified.

D. The Gettier Problem

For some time, the justified true belief (JTB) account was widely agreed to capture the nature of knowledge. However, in 1963, Edmund Gettier published a short but widely influential article which has shaped much subsequent work in epistemology. Gettier provided two examples in which someone had a true and justified belief, but in which we seem to want to deny that the individual has knowledge, because luck still seems to play a role in his belief having turned out to be true.

Conclusion

The study of knowledge is one of the most fundamental aspects of philosophical inquiry. Any claim to knowledge must be evaluated to determine whether or not it indeed constitutes knowledge. Such an evaluation essentially requires an understanding of what knowledge is and how much knowledge is possible.

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