

General Philosophy: Knowledge

Philosophy roadmap

Analytic philosophy (the logic-influenced style of philosophy practiced in the Anglo-American world since the turn of the 20th century) is often sub-divided into three categories, and then into further sub-categories:

1. Theoretical philosophy

- (a) Epistemology (theory of knowledge)
- (b) Metaphysics (study of what exists—‘ontology’)
- (c) Philosophy of language
- (d) Logic
- (e) Philosophy of mind
- (f) Philosophy of religion
- (g) Philosophy of science

2. Practical philosophy

- (a) Ethics
- (b) Aesthetics
- (c) Political theory

3. History of philosophy

- (a) Ancient philosophy
- (b) Medieval philosophy
- (c) Early modern philosophy
- (d) Kantian philosophy
- (e) Post-Kantian philosophy (continuous with continental philosophy)

You can study all of these at Oxford (there are Finals papers associated with each of the above—and many more besides!).

The purpose of the General Philosophy paper is to give you a taste of different aspects of theoretical philosophy. In particular, the paper covers the following topics (I've indicated which of the above sub-fields each topics falls under):

- The analysis of knowledge [1(a)]
- Philosophical scepticism [1(a)]
- The problem of induction [1(a)]
- Free will [1(b)]
- Personal identity [1(b)]
- The mind/body problem [1(e)]
- Perception [1(e)]
- The problem of evil [1(f)]

At Pembroke, we usually don't teach perception or the problem of evil (you don't need to know every topic for the exam—there will be one question for each topic, so covering six is more than sufficient, and still gives you room to drop topics which you don't like at the revision stage).

Today, we'll be looking at the analysis of knowledge.

Conceptual analysis

Suppose we are thinking about some difficult concept, like *justice*, or *causation*, or the *morally good*. Part (though by no means all) of the purpose of philosophy is to try to *analyse* the concept in question—to make clear what that concept *means*. For example:

- Hume analysed causation as the ‘constant conjunction’ of events of one type with events of another type.
- Utilitarians analyse the morally good as that which maximises net utility.

Analyses may be better or worse. Should an analysis faces an unacceptably large number of problem cases, we might be compelled to reject it in favour of some other analysis of the concept in question.

In the remainder of today, we’ll be looking at the analysis of *knowledge*. This falls under the remit of *epistemology*.

The JTB analysis of knowledge

Plato, in his *Theatetus*,¹ provided an analysis of knowledge which stood (at least in the Western world—see below) for the next two thousand years:

A subject *S* knows a proposition *p* if and only if (‘iff’):

1. *p* is true;
2. *S* believes that *p*;
3. *S* is justified in believing that *p*.

This the *JTB analysis of knowledge*. Make sure you’re happy with why all three conditions are included!

For example, I know that I am currently in Pembroke College, because (the analysis goes): (1) it’s true that I’m in Pembroke; (2) I believe that I’m in Pembroke; (3) I’m justified in believing I’m in Pembroke (I’m currently see the right kinds of sensory impressions associated with my being in Pembroke, etc.).

¹The *Theatetus* is one of around 30 dialogues penned by Plato over the course of his lifetime. Together, these dialogues cover the entire spectrum of philosophical issues. One dialogue which will become familiar to PPEists is the *Republic*, in which Plato discusses his political philosophy.

If it weren't true that I'm in Pembroke, how could I know it? Similarly, how could I know things which I don't even believe? (For example, is it really plausible to say 'James knows he's in Pembroke College', if James believes he's in St. John's College?)²

Gettier cases

The above analysis of knowledge stood for many centuries. However, it was revealed to be problematic in examples such as cases considered by the Indian philosopher Dharmottara, writing around the year 770:

A fire has just been lit to roast some meat. The fire hasn't started sending up any smoke, but the smell of the meat has attracted a cloud of insects. From a distance, an observer sees the dark swarm above the horizon and mistakes it for smoke. 'There's a fire burning at that spot', the distant observer says. (Nagel, p. 58)

These cases weren't presented by Dharmottara as a direct rejoinder to Plato, but the point stands that they pose problems for the JTB view of knowledge—for in this case, the distant observer seems to have a justified, true belief that there's a fire, but nevertheless many would feel reluctant to attribute him or her knowledge (for he/she has believed 'for the wrong reasons'—he/she has mistaken the cloud of insects for smoke).

The same kinds of issues were hit upon independently (and several centuries later) by the American philosopher, Edmund Gettier, in 1963. Gettier presented us with hypothetical situations such as the following:

1. Either Smith or Jones will get a job.
2. Smith believes that Jones will get the job.
3. Smith sees Jones put ten coins into his (i.e., Jones') pocket.

²To be clear: these are rhetorical questions.

4. Smith thereby comes to believe, 'The person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.'
5. Unbeknownst to Smith, it is he, *Smith*, who will get the job. Moreover, Smith happens to have ten coins in his pocket.
6. Thus, the proposition 'The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket' is (1) true; (2) Smith believes it, and (3) Smith is justified in believing 'The man who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket' (because he saw the man whom he thinks will get the job put ten coins into his pocket.)
7. Conclusion: Justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge!

A lot of post-Gettier analytic epistemology has focussed on the question: *what is the missing factor which must be added to JTB in order to correctly identify cases of knowledge?* One initial popular response was to appeal to so-called *causal analyses of knowledge*.

Causal analyses of knowledge

In response to the Gettier cases, Goldman proposed in 1967 a causal analysis of knowledge. This adds a fourth criterion to the JTB analysis of knowledge: *S's belief that p is causally connected with the truth that p.*

This rules out the Gettier cases as instances of knowledge—because in these cases, the belief is due to a lucky accident, rather than anything directly related to the proposition in question. For example, in the Smith-Jones case, Smith's belief in the proposition 'The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket' is formed by mistakenly thinking Jones will get the job—it is not formed on the basis of anything *Smith* has done.

There are, however, problems for causal theories of knowledge—for example, the infamous *barn cases*. (I'll walk through these in the class.) The approaches also face the issue of spelling out what causation is supposed to be: a thorny philosophical matter in itself!

Internalism and externalism about justification

Causal analyses of knowledge have the form 'JTB+X': they attempt to *augment* the JTB analysis with some extra condition—the 'X-factor'—in order to avoid Gettier-type cases and thereby provide a good analysis of knowledge. We saw that causal analyses didn't really work, because they have problem cases of their own. But perhaps some other JTB+X analysis might work out: I'll leave it to you to think about what this account could be.

A different strategy is to *reconceptualise our notion of justification*: one could say, these accounts have the form 'J*TB', where here J* is the modified notion of justification (as opposed to the original J). The most common J*TB strategy is to appeal to *externalism about justification*. The distinction between internalism and externalism about justification is the following:

- According to *internalism* about justification, the factors which contribute to *S*'s justification in believing *p* must be cognitively accessible to *S*.
- According to *externalism* about justification, the factors which contribute to *S*'s justification in believing *p* need not be cognitively accessible to *S*.

Externalists can then say that (for example) Smith in the Gettier case is *not* justified, by some external standards; therefore (by this J*TB analysis of knowledge) does not *know* that the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. But there are outstanding questions which externalists must answer:

1. What *are* these external criteria for justification? Can advocates of externalism please spell these out more explicitly?
2. Externalism leads to violations of the 'KK principle' which says that 'Knowledge implies knowledge of knowledge'. This isn't necessarily true for the externalist, because the agent in question doesn't necessarily have access to the factors which contribute to her justification (externally construed), so she doesn't always know whether she satisfies the (externalist) criteria for knowledge.

References

- [1] Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis* 23, pp. 121-123, 1963.
- [2] Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [3] Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing", *The Journal of Philosophy* 64(12), pp. 357-372, 1967.
- [4] David M. Armstrong, "The Thermometer Model of Knowledge", in Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (eds.) *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 72-85, 2000.
- [5] Laurence Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5, pp. 53-73, 1980.
- [6] Linda Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44(174), 65-73, 1994.