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73

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This essay critically engages with the relevant reading, showing an excellent grasp of the lecture material & module content. You demonstrate a systematic understanding of the topic, presenting an incredibly clear consideration of the essay Q, as well as a critical appreciation of the wider dimensions of the topic. The essay would benefit from a section before the conclusion that links the content a little more to global and/or local scepticism.

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HPPH7010 "Knowledge, Reason and Reality" Assignment 2
 Keith Dowling Student No. 2209177

Q4. What are the chief problems that philosophers have confronted in providing a definition of knowledge that would stand firm against the threat of sceptical doubt?

Sceptical arguments can be directed against most of the things we claim to know. And we should try to answer them. Otherwise we cannot maintain that our knowledge claims are justified. And, as the question suggests, a good way of meeting the sceptic's 'threat' would be to clearly state the necessary and sufficient conditions to be met by any warranted claim to knowledge. However, as we shall see, Descartes radical scepticism presents a major problem for all knowledge claims. Also the standard definition of knowledge in terms of 'justified true beliefs' proves difficult to defend against milder forms of scepticism. ✓

Scepticism in epistemology is expressed in a variety of ways. In §1 of this essay, I will summarise what I think is the most radical way, the hyperbolic doubt of Descartes.¹ He tries to show that the reasons we offer as grounds for almost all of our knowledge claims about the world might be mistaken. In §2, I will outline the distinction we nonetheless make in everyday discourse between 'knowing that p' and, on the other hand, 'believing that p', where it is argued that a definition of 'knowing that p' can be given in terms of 'justified true belief'. And I will summarise the three necessary and sufficient conditions that are said to be entailed by this definition. In §3, I will try to defend each of the conditions in question against milder forms of scepticism. In particular, in §4, I will discuss Edmund Gettier's (1963) objection that even where the three conditions are met, we still may not have a case of knowledge. As a result we seem left without a watertight defense of our everyday knowledge claims. In §5, my conclusion, along with summarising the arguments we have considered, I will suggest that rather than regarded as a threat, the forms of scepticism we have considered should be prized. ✓

Good introduction

¹ In a longer essay I would have included Hume's (1737) sceptical claim that our beliefs extend well beyond our actual impressions and ideas; and they give rise to knowledge claims about the world that are unsupported. And also Foucault's (1966a: xvi) relativism: '...the thing that ...is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that, let alone knowing that.'

This is useful.

§1 Descartes radical scepticism

In order to provide a sure foundation for all of his knowledge claims, Descartes (1641:13) decided to '...withhold my assent... from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable...'; to accept as knowledge only those beliefs that appeared to him to be clear and distinct, beyond the possibility of doubt. This seems a very demanding condition. It could lead to the conclusion that all knowledge is beyond our reach. Small wonder, Descartes found that he could doubt many things generally considered very certain; ✓ in fact almost everything we claim to know. He could doubt, for instance, all of his *a posteriori* knowledge claims obtained by perception since '...the senses are sometimes deceptive...' (1641:14). On some occasions, he is deceived by illusory experiences. More worryingly, the fact that sometimes he dreams that he is awake seems, to Descartes, to challenge the trustworthiness of all of his perceptual beliefs. Worse still, he argued that he might be mistaken about his claims to *a priori* knowledge; he included here beliefs in mathematics and logic: Because there is always a possibility that he is deceived about such things by '...an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me' (1641:16).² This argument infects nearly every one of his beliefs and claims to knowledge. If Descartes hypothesis is coherent, it could be that there is nothing in the world beside me and the evil genius who deceives me.³ That's scepticism for you!

Such a sceptical possibility deserves to be explored. However It is pointed out that we have good grounds for accepting a more common sense view of knowledge; one that provides the best explanation of our everyday experience.⁴ In ordinary experience, we *do* claim we know, in contrast to believe, facts about the world, about people and places, present and past events, cause and effect relationships, generalisations about nature, the truth of logical inferences, mathematical proofs, and so on. In other words, radical scepticism, like Descartes', is regarded as tangential as a philosophical guide for everyday discourse,

² Putnam (1981:4-7) gives a modern version of Descartes evil genius hypothesis; for all I know I am a brain-in-a-vat, at the mercy of a malign scientist who uses electrodes to manipulate all of my thoughts. ✓

³ The one thing that Descartes could not be sceptical about is, of course, his awareness of his doubting and thereby his own conscious states.

⁴ See e.g. Thomas Reid (1764) who argued that when the conclusions of Philosophy run counter to common sense, there must be something wrong with philosophy;. See also e.g. GE Moore (1925:15).

where knowledge claims are correctly contrasted with claims about things we believe. It seems senseless, for instance, to question whether or not I know that 'this is *my* hand typing this essay', or that 'George Eliot wrote *Silas Marner*', or that 'heavier than air objects fall to the ground', or ' $5 + 7 = 12$ ' and so forth. Normally, we would not question the reliability of such knowledge or ask how it was obtained. Occasionally, however, we are shocked to find that what we thought we knew is proven doubtful, or it is plainly false. And rather than 'know that P', we only believed that P. So what is the basis for this distinction?

§2 Necessary and sufficient conditions for 'S knows that p'

In the distant past and especially more recently, philosophers have given a definition of knowledge in terms of 'justified true belief.'⁵ More specifically, it is claimed that someone, S, can correctly claim 'I know that P' if and only if (i) P is true, (ii) S believes that P; and (iii) S has adequate evidence for P. Let us consider each of these conditions.

Firstly, the truth condition: S can claim to know that P if only if (i) P is true.⁶ S will believe any number of propositions some of which might well be false. Thus S may claim to believe that Q – e.g. that God exists – but that Q might be false. But S cannot claim 'I know that P and that P might be false'. This statement is self-contradictory. Of course, it may be that S thought she knew P, but if P is false, she didn't really know it. Accordingly, 'George Eliot wrote *Silas Marner*' and the other propositions above are candidates for my knowledge claims because they are true.

But (i), the truth requirement, though necessary is not sufficient. There are plenty of true propositions in, say, nuclear physics that S (and I) do not know to be true – (unless S happens to be a specialist in that area). So what more is required?

Secondly is (ii) the belief condition. S must believe that p. We cannot identify knowledge with belief. They are not two names of the same mental state. This is easily shown. There is no contradiction in saying, 'I believe that George Eliot never married – but I do not know this'. Or 'I believe Black Beauty will win the race at Exeter tomorrow – but of course I do not know it'. Even if it

Is knowledge a mental state? Perhaps say why you think this.

⁵ See e.g. Plato's *Theaetetus* 210a) where knowledge is defined as 'true belief with an account'. See also e.g. AJ Ayer (1956:34).

⁶ Sceptics do not successfully repudiate condition (i). Even when they try – see e.g. Foucault (1966a: xvii) '...the truths of an epoch have no authority outside of it...' – they need to ask themselves whether their own knowledge claim is true; for if it is, it is false!

turns out that the horse does win, at the time of my prediction I merely believed P, I did not know that P. I think we would say here, like Rebeka Humphreys (Lecture 6 p.5) notes '...the context will determine whether a belief counts as knowledge'. Even if it turns out that my horse racing prediction is correct, in this context this is a matter of luck or accident. So the states of knowing and believing are not the same.

But condition (ii) requires something more. It demands that S actually *believes* that P. S must have a certain attitude towards P – not merely that of wondering or hoping but of positively believing that P is true. Even so, there will be numerous things that S believes P, Q, R... Some of these beliefs, e.g. P, she will feel very sure about, so that P becomes firmly embedded in her thinking and might significantly shape her grasp of reality. Accordingly, following condition (ii), she might claim to 'know that P is the case' rather than merely believing it. But S's knowledge is not established merely because she has great confidence 'that P', rather, it is on the grounds or reasons S has for believing it. This brings us to condition (iii)

The third requirement (iii) is the justification condition: S must have adequate evidence for P. As Humphreys (Lecture 2: p 4) writes: 'For my beliefs to constitute knowledge... some form of justification or evidence for my beliefs would be required, something which would establish or provide a justification for their truth...'. Along these lines, sometimes I justify my claim to know by pointing to a body of established, reliable knowledge. Thus I claim to know that 'George Eliot wrote *Silas Marner*'. In support of this claim I would point out that I studied this novel at A-level and her name was on the cover of the book.⁷ Added to this, the examining authority is likely to be a trustworthy source. Also earlier today I "checked it out" in the Encyclopaedia Britannica; another trustworthy source.

Do I need more evidence to convert my true belief into knowledge? My true belief here is supported by reasons acquired from a reliable source(s), process or method. On the other hand, if I chanced on P by luck or by guess work, you are very likely say that I do not really know that P. Or, as we noted, the context may be one that makes the source of my knowledge claim unreliable. In the prediction-of-winners-of-horse-races, due to this context, I cannot have the evidence that entitles me to claim to know that P, (see Gettier's example 1 below). For the moment, let it suffice to

⁷ I have even seen the original text in the British Library.

say that we do not usually accept that someone has the required evidence unless they have a reliable source or they have followed an accredited route to support their knowledge claim.

What if the context is one where P is a logical consequence of a true belief that S holds? Gettier thinks this too is entailed by the definition of justified true belief. He (1963:145) writes '...for any proposition P, if S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as the result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q'. This seems correct. But what about the case where P entails Q and S believes that P, but she is unaware of the entailment Q (see Gettier's example 2 below). I think we would say that she believes Q only if S does believe that 'P entails Q'. I will return to this point shortly

Can we say 'S knows that P – not just believes or surmises but "knows" – when conditions (i) – (iii) are met? Unfortunately, there are problems that each of these conditions face. ✓

§3 Some objections to conditions (i)-(iii) above.

Firstly, It may be objected against 'the truth' condition (i) that it is always possible that any statement accepted as true, may turn out to be false. The history of science, for instance, is packed with "facts" that have been thought to be true only then to be discredited. In defense of (i), I think we would insist that the moment S has a reason to believe that a scientific statement (or any other proposition) is not true, this immediately negates S's claim to know it; S cannot know P, if P isn't true. Let us turn to a slightly more troublesome challenges to condition (ii). ✓

It could be objected against 'the belief' condition (ii) that there can be cases of knowledge without the accompanying belief. Consider the case I experienced a few years ago. I asked a student, S, to remind the class who wrote the novel *Silas Marner*. She replied: "I'm sorry, I don't know". But she had recently written a good essay on this very subject. I thought (quite reasonably) S knows P - even though she doesn't realise she does. The problem with this is that, at the time of my asking her, S did not believe she knows P. And condition (ii) requires 'S believes that P'. So given condition (ii) we seem obliged to say that this is not a case of knowledge since S lacks the accompanying belief. Perhaps a solution here – vis. to the fact that the first-person S says that she doesn't know, as distinct from my third-person claim that she does know - would be to distinguish between first person and third person conditions that we give for justified true belief. Conditions (i) – (iii) apply only to first person contexts.

What about 'the justification' condition (iii): S must have sufficient evidence to give her the right to be sure that P? It might be objected that there are propositions S clearly knows, where it would be absurd to ask for any evidence. For instance, if S says 'I have a toothache', S doesn't require sufficient evidence for her knowledge claim.⁸ Following Descartes, all of her first-person reports about her present conscious experiences are self-justifying. However, perhaps we can still hold onto condition (iii) by maintaining that S *does* have adequate evidence here because the experience itself constitutes all the evidence needed.

A second objection to (iii) is that the demand for sufficient evidence - to convert a true belief into knowledge - surely requires also that S has further supporting reasons to justify the ones that she gives. And won't she need to justify each of these supporting reasons? Thus falling into a regress, never being in a position to wholly justify any claim to know P. In defence of the standard account, we might argue that the regress might not go on indefinitely. Perhaps we can show that the process of justification always terminates in self-guaranteeing propositions, such as 'I have a toothache' or 'I am doubting' (a la Descartes). But I don't think that this response will do. The stock of propositions that we claim to know seems far too wide for all of them to reduce to first person reports of current conscious experiences. A better defence of (iii) would be to argue that the regress is harmless. At whatever point in the chain the process of giving supporting reasons is brought to an end, S could have gone further.

Let us suppose, despite the problems above, the three conditions pass muster as an account of the requirements for a warranted claim to knowledge. It is at this point that our troubles really begin. Gettier (1963:144-145) gives two examples which he claims show that even when all the three conditions are met - and we have justified true belief - this still need not amount to a genuine case of knowledge.

§ 4 Gettier's examples

Example 1. Smith and Jones are the only candidates for a job. And the president of the company has told Smith that Jones is the best candidate. Before the interview, while Jones and Smith are chatting to each other, Jones happens to count the coins in his

⁸ It is also odd to ask for evidence for a tautology, such as 'Greek women are Greek', or for intuitive truths like $P \ \& \ (P \supset Q) \text{ then } Q$.

pocket. There are 10 coins. So pre-interview, as a result of his conversations, Smith has the justified true belief P: '*the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket*'. Smith (ii) believes that P; Smith (iii) has good reason for believing P; and (Smith thinks) (i) P is true. Now imagine that actually Smith gets the job. And, in his euphoria, he discovers that there are 10 coins in his own pocket. Shouldn't we say with Gettier (1963:145): '(i) P is true, and (ii) Smith believes that P is true, and Smith is justified in believing that P is true? But it is equally clear that Smith does not really *know* that P is true. In other words, should we accept that, in this example, meeting the requirements of justified true belief does not equate with knowledge?

Or should we point out, *contra* Gettier, (a) before the interview, Smith did not have sufficient evidence to be sure that P; condition (iii) was not met. One thing that makes Smith's evidence inadequate is that the results of job interviews – like the prediction-of-winners-of-horse-races – are contexts where no amount of pre-interview information is sufficient for the claim to have sufficient evidence to *know* that P is true.

Alternatively *contra* Gettier should we say (b) that in the example, post interview, to find that there are 10 coins in his pocket suggests an excessive amount of luck and, as we argued earlier, if S chances on P by luck (rather than by a legitimate route for evidence), we are likely to say that S did not have sufficient evidence that P.

I am suggesting that either of (a) insufficient evidence or (b) a matter of luck, gives us grounds for maintaining that S's evidence for P is flawed; either insufficient evidence or sheer luck disqualify S's claim to know. Or we could point out, (c) that Gettier's example trades on the fallacy of ambiguity. The descriptive phrase 'the man with 10 coins in his pocket' is used to refer to one person pre-interview and then to a quite different person post-interview, thereby allowing a conclusion that would not otherwise have been possible. If any of (a), (b), (c) are correct then we have defended 'justified true belief' against this putative counter-example. What about Gettier's other counter-example?

Example 2 We are told that Smith has a justified belief P - 'Jones owns a Ford'. From this, Smith then concludes $P \vee Q$: '*Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston*'. This is justified by the rule of disjunction introduction. In propositional logic, the truth of any disjunction requires that only one of the disjuncts (not necessarily both) is true; (see Copi (1961-222-224)). In Gettier's example the disjunction $P \vee Q$ is true - even though Smith has no

information whatsoever about the location of Brown. In fact it turns out that Jones does *not* own a Ford, but by sheer coincidence, Brown really is in Boston. Again, Gettier claims that Smith has a belief that is true and justified, but this is not a case of knowledge.

How might we defend conditions (i) - (iii) here? In the example, let us accept that condition (i) is met - $P \vee Q$ is true. Because while P is false, Q happens to be true. Also let us accept (for the moment) that condition (ii) is met: *vis.* since S believes that P , by the rule of logic, S also believes that $P \vee Q$. However condition (iii) is not so compliant. Since with (iii) we are now asking if S has adequate evidence for his belief. This moves the consideration from logic into the field of epistemology. In this latter context, since Smith does not believe Brown is in Boston it is not at all clear that S has adequate grounds for believing Q in the disjunction $P \vee Q$. Otherwise, from a logical point of view, we are forced to accept the bizarre entailment that if Q happens to be true, P could be any true or false proposition whatsoever that S may or may not believe (e.g. Jones is a pink elephant) and S would believe in the disjunction $P \vee Q$. As we noted earlier, we are not forced to accept this 'oddity' if we insist that if there is a logical consequence of Smith's belief for which, as a matter of fact, Smith does not have adequate reasons, this is a good epistemic reason for denying (ii) S believes that $P \vee Q$. If we accept this amendment, we could say that Gettier's counter-example fails condition (ii). A justified true belief requires that S actually believes the evidence.

Even if I have managed to side-step Gettier's sceptical counterexamples, it is still not clear that conditions (i) - (iii) have framed a cogent concept of our everyday claims to knowledge. And there is no guarantee that they will stand firm against Descartes' more radical threat of sceptical doubt. Which leads me to ask: Is scepticism really a 'threat' anyway?

— *Insert small section to directly answer this Q before*
§.5 Conclusion *conclusion, perhaps.*

In this essay, we have considered two major sceptical problems that philosophers have confronted in providing a definition of knowledge. We started out by noting the problems for Descartes' own definition in terms of 'clear and distinct ideas beyond the possibility of doubt' - its sceptical outcome that we have no sure grounds for thinking that most of our ordinary knowledge claims are true. How do I know that my sense perception can be trusted? How do I know if I am not hallucinating or dreaming? How do I

know that there is not an evil genius at work arranging things in my mind in such a way that even my ability to think rationally is put into doubt. At best, all I may claim to know are those proposition about my present states of consciousness which, as we noted, are self-authenticating. However this leaves us with the possibility that all our scientific knowledge and most of our common sense beliefs are forfeit. We would fail to know almost anything at all.

But in spite of this, I do not regard Descartes radical scepticism (or the strong sceptical arguments from other philosophers) as a threat. They ask us to consider again if we have adequate grounds for all our knowledge claims. And in this, I think they provide a great stimulus to philosophy because until we find answers to them (e.g. Kant's transcendental arguments against both Descartes and Hume), we have no grounds for thinking any of our knowledge claims are justified. However, one drawback we noted about Descartes' scepticism is that it leaves us without the contrast we need to make between things we ordinarily claim to know and, on the other hand, things we say we believe.

In this context, I outlined the definition of knowledge that is given in terms of the three necessary conditions entailed by justified true belief. And I considered Gettier's milder form of scepticism that challenges the adequacy of these conditions – viz. even when these condition are fulfilled we may not have a case of knowledge. If this scepticism isn't successfully contested, a different account is needed for what ordinarily we mean by 'knowledge'. I tried to show how we might respond to Gettier's scepticism.

However, once again, I think that such scepticism is not a threat to philosophy. The sceptic asks questions that need to be asked of our knowledge claims. They demand a higher standard of evidence than is usually given in the standard definition of knowledge. And maybe, sometimes, the sceptic has the best arguments!

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