

With reference to the Gettier problem, discuss why the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is considered to be incomplete?

Throughout history, philosophers have worked to analyse and define knowledge. One of the most popular and widely accepted frameworks used to do this is justified true belief.¹ This framework can be traced back to Plato² and has been discussed extensively for a long time. However, there have always been criticisms of justified true belief,³ especially after the publication of Edmund Gettier's 1963 paper.⁴ Gettier highlights the gaps in justified true belief with specific examples, challenging the framework's position in epistemology.⁵ Since then, philosophers have tried to find solutions to the Gettier problem⁶ or have argued for other frameworks entirely.⁷ Considering these discussions, the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief is generally a good and useful analysis despite well argued exceptions such as the Gettier problem. This essay explores the justified true belief framework and how it is used to analyse knowledge, before delving into the Gettier problem and its application to justified true belief. It then discusses other frameworks and the general scepticism surrounding justified true belief, and showcases the difficulties in analysing knowledge as it undoubtedly leads to an impossible solution.

Now more than ever, the philosophical debate on knowledge is important. The modern political and cultural landscape is full of conspiracy theories, fake news and alternative facts. The US press secretary claimed to have alternative facts when questioned about false information in 2017,⁸ and celebrity news questions whether Jim Carrey has been cloned.⁹ How can we be sure of knowing anything?

¹ Jonathan, Ichikawa, and, Matthias, Steup, 'The Analysis of Knowledge', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2001), sec. 3, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/?ref=quilllette.com>> [accessed 22 July 2026].

² Pierre, Le Morvan, 'Knowledge before Gettier', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (2017), p. 1219.

³ Ichikawa, and, Steup, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. 3.

⁴ Le Morvan, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, p. 1216.

⁵ Duncan, Pritchard, *What is this thing called knowledge?*, (2014), p. 27.

⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸ David, Smith, 'Alternative facts, witch-hunt, bigly: the Trump era in 32 words and phrases', *The Guardian*, (2020), <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/28/alternative-facts-bigly-witch-hunt-trump-era-words-phrases>> [accessed 30 July 2026].

⁹ Catherine, Shoard, 'He worked on his speech in French for months': César awards boss rejects Jim Carrey clone conspiracy theories', *The Guardian*, (2026), <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2026/mar/02/cesar-awards-boss-rejects-jim-carrey-clone-conspiracy-theories>> [accessed 30 July 2026].

Justified true belief has long been considered the traditional definition of knowledge.¹⁰ Plato argued that true belief was not enough to claim knowledge, as your belief needs to be justified¹¹ as well as true,¹² thus legitimising the justified true belief framework. Justified true belief can also be referred to as the tripartite analysis of knowledge.¹³ Ichikawa and Steup present an example of this analysis in the article *The Analysis of Knowledge*.

The Tripartite Analysis of Knowledge:

S knows that P if and only if:

1. It is true that P;
2. S believes that P; and
3. S is justified in believing that P.¹⁴

The tripartite analysis of knowledge is made up of three conditions.¹⁵ The first is the truth condition.¹⁶ Without truth there is no knowledge, no matter if we are able to access that truth or not.¹⁷ Some epistemologists argue that ‘what is false cannot be known’,¹⁸ so when analysing knowledge, you must find the circumstances that truly mean someone knows a proposition.¹⁹ Otherwise without this you will be unable to make a correct analysis. Secondly, there is the belief condition.²⁰ Despite the debates surrounding the definition of belief, Justified true belief refers to total belief.²¹ This condition relies on the idea that ‘you can only know what you believe.’²² And lastly, there is the justification condition.²³ It is important that when forming beliefs they are justified using truthful evidence.²⁴ You cannot have knowledge without proper justification.²⁵ These conditions are integral to the justified true belief framework in setting an outline to follow when analysing and defining knowledge.

¹⁰ Le Morvan, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, p. 1216.

¹¹ Pritchard, *What is this thing called knowledge?*, p. 23.

¹² Duncan, Pritchard, John, Turri, and, J.Adam, Carter, ‘The Value of Knowledge’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Stanford University, 2025), sec. 1, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/knowledge-value/>> [accessed 22 July 2026].

¹³ Ichikawa, and, Steup, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.2.

²² *Ibid.*, sec. 1.2.

²³ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 1.3.

The Gettier problem attempts to reveal flaws in the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Gettier references the standard conditions for knowledge, one being identical to the tripartite of knowledge that Ichikawa and Steup also discuss, but all were argued against equally.²⁶ Gettier makes the point that fair justification does not always lead to knowledge as you can easily be misinformed, and then another point, that if you believe in something that entails a second proposition, you are justified in believing that.²⁷ Following on from these points, Gettier poses multiple examples of cases in which the justified true belief framework would not result in knowledge. Using the example of Smith and Jones, two men in the running for the same job, Smith has justified belief that Jones will get the position because the president of the company told him so.²⁸ Smith forms a second proposition from this information, that the person with ten coins in their pocket will get the job.²⁹ He forms this belief after noticing Jones counting the coins in his pocket.³⁰ In the end, Smith gets the job, and his proposition turns out to be true because he also had ten coins in his pocket without realising.³¹ This showcases that what someone believes to be true cannot be certain, and there is an element of luck to why his proposition turned out to be correct.³² Luck is not commonly classed as knowledge.

Since its publication, Gettier's paper has sparked a wide array of philosophers to try and improve the justified true belief analysis while avoiding creating further 'Gettier-type counterexamples.'³³ One attempt to tighten up the analysis consists of adding a further condition that true belief must be justified without false presupposition.³⁴ However, this is difficult to prove. It can also seem far fetched to believe that someone would naturally think of the second proposition in Gettier's example. It is not impossible, but how many people would really refer to the person getting the job by how many coins are in their pocket? Though unlikely, it brings forward the argument that there is no proof or guarantee that a second proposition will occur from our beliefs, creating a Gettier problem.³⁵ It could happen, like in the case of Smith, but for many people, they will only believe the first proposition.

The idea that justified true belief is generally accepted as an analysis of knowledge perhaps gives a false impression of philosophical consensus of knowledge before

²⁶ Edmund L. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis*, (1963), p. 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³² Linda Zagzebski, 'What is Knowledge?', *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, (1999), p. 100.

³³ Robert K. Shope, 'Conditions and Analyses of Knowing', *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, (2002), p. 27.

³⁴ Pritchard, *What is this thing called knowledge?*, p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Gettier.³⁶ A number of philosophers have pointed out that there are other ways of thinking about knowledge, as there can be gaps in justified true belief.³⁷ Methodism suggests that we already know the criteria of knowledge, and that we can achieve this through philosophical reflection.³⁸ While particularism requires focusing on particular instances of knowledge, and determining criteria from what we are able to understand.³⁹ Justified true belief is only one example of a criteria of knowledge, and despite the potential faults of other frameworks, it is worth being aware that there are other options out there. It is impossible to ignore the noted issues with justified true belief, and it certainly raises question about whether philosophers can be satisfied with justified true belief as a complete analysis of knowledge.

One way in which the analysis may be seen as incomplete has been revealed by sceptics who have pointed out problems with the justified true belief analysis. Finding a universal analysis of knowledge is difficult, and sceptics have discussed that the issue could be with assuming there is a suitable framework at all.⁴⁰ Justified true belief and other frameworks can only assume knowledge has been achieved, they can never actually show for certain that it has.⁴¹

It is clear that providing a definition of knowledge has been problematic and this results in the justified true belief analysis seeming incomplete. Every condition of justified true belief is debatable, as some philosophers would argue that people can have knowledge without belief, or that knowledge happens unconsciously.⁴² The analysis can also isolate children and animals from knowledge, considering that they process the world differently and it may not be provable that they follow each condition.⁴³ It would not be an easy argument to make that children and animals are incapable of knowledge. As humans we all have our own 'conceptual frameworks' that provide our beliefs and can impact our ability to understand or accept the truth,⁴⁴ so how can any one analysis of knowledge produce a consistent definition of knowledge? The answer is that at this current moment it cannot, but philosophers will continue to try.

Undoubtedly there are faults and gaps within the justified true belief analysis of knowledge that cause it to be considered incomplete. However, if there really is no

³⁶ Le Morvan, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, p. 1217.

³⁷ Ichikawa, and, Steup, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, sec. 3.

³⁸ Pritchard, *What is this thing called knowledge?*, p. 21.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴² Seyyed Jaaber, Mousavirad, 'Is knowledge a Justified Belief?', *Pizhūhish'hā-yi falsafī-kalāmī : faşlnāmah-i Dānishgāh-i Qum*, (2024), p. 177.

⁴³ Zagzebski, *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Byeong D, Lee, 'Knowledge as Objectively Justified Belief', *Acta Analytica*, (2022), pp. 398-399.

universal analysis now that is totally complete, then the justified true belief framework still has a place in helping us understand knowledge. Gettier's paper is useful in encouraging further thinking and pushes philosophers to find suitable solutions to the gaps in justified true belief. Perhaps there will come a day when justified true belief can be undefeated in defining knowledge, but without effort to work out these flaws, that will never happen. It also comes down to perspective, as some sceptics believe that there never will be a universal framework for analysing knowledge, or that other frameworks are better. It is not enough to accept one framework as fact, but if you are to analyse knowledge, then why should it not be adequate to use justified true belief if it is personally deemed suitable? Apart from the rather specific examples that Gettier provided, justified true belief appears to be a mostly solid way of analysing knowledge.

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