

Evaluate the tripartite definition of knowledge

Foundationalism and Coherentism are concerned with how beliefs “hang” together but philosophers also beg to ask another question, can we provide a definition of knowledge?

The tripartite definition has been held since Plato and it is that knowledge has to have three conditions, justification, truth and beliefs. These three conditions are necessary and together are sufficient. If someone knows something e.g. Laura was born in 1989 then each and all of the above conditions must be satisfied for it to be knowledge.

There are two arguments against the tripartite definitions. The first is from a philosopher named Colin Radford who asked if all the conditions were necessary. If we suppose that in an exam Adam was asked the questions what is $1 + 1$? He has learnt simple arithmetic in the past but forgotten it so he writes down an answer of 2 as a guess. This guess of 2 is correct and Adam actually knew the answer but he didn't BELIEVE his answer to be correct as he had forgotten he had learnt simple arithmetic.

D.M. Armstrong responds to this saying consciously Adam doesn't know the answer but subconsciously he does, this means he holds contradictory beliefs but there is nothing wrong in this as many people do often hold them. Radford then rejects Armstrong's points and says that the only reasons he could say he believes unconsciously is the fact that Adam gave the right answer and that what Adam believed is what Radford puts into question. Armstrong replies again to Radford saying that Adam **did** believe the answers but Armstrong and Radford agreed Adam knew the right answer. So what if Adam did not know the answers? This means Adam would then hold contradictory beliefs but if someone believes $1+1=2$ and believes that $1+1=3$ then you can say it cannot be right to attribute the knowledge of $1+1=2$ to Adam.

The next argument against the tripartite definition is brought by Edmund Gettier who asked are the conditions sufficient. He published an article saying that you could actually fulfil all the conditions of the definition but still not actually possess knowledge at all. The following two examples make it clearer:

Suppose Zoe and Bethan are applying for jobs as sales assistants in Asda. As they chat while waiting to be interviewed they discover that Zoe has more experience and qualifications than Bethan and she is also friends with the manager of the store. Bethan then believes Zoe is to get a job in light of these facts. Zoe then counts out the coins in her pocket and has 10.

Bethan then comes to believe the following proposition:

A: Zoe is the woman who will get the job and she has 10 coins in her pocket.

Bethan then infers from this proposition that

B. The woman who will get the job has 10 coins in her pocket

They are both then interviewed and Bethan is offered the job and, by coincidence, Bethan has 10 coins in her pocket although she does not know this. So:

- 1) B is true
- 2) Bethan believes B
- 3) Bethan is justified in believing B

However, Bethan did not know that it was a justified true belief and she acquired her belief in the wrong kind of way, it was an accident that she obtained a justified true belief.

The next example is that Henry and William work in the same office and Henry believes that William owns a Ford as he has seen him drive the car and been driven to work in it by William. This means that Henry believes the following proposition:

- a) William owns a Ford

Then we shall suppose that Henry has another colleague called Martha and she is on holiday. Henry has no idea where this holiday so he guesses and comes up with this proposition:

b) Either William owns a Ford **or** Martha is in Italy,
this is entailed but the proposition a) and is true. Therefore we can say that:

1. b) is true
2. Henry believes b)
3. Henry is justified in believing b)

Henry actually has no idea where Martha is and but sheer coincidence Martha is in fact in Italy and William does not actually own a Ford. This means that Henry does not actually know that b) is true but nevertheless it is actually true as only one of the statements had to be true. The statement that William owns a Ford was justified but the statement that Martha is in Italy is true. This means that the justification is disconnected but this scenario has all 3 conditions yet is not knowledge.

Responses to this are that we should shift attention from justification to the place of subject and its relations to it in the world. This is understood in terms of distinction between unreliable and reliable ways of collection beliefs and then reliabilism is put into question.

To conclude the tripartite definition does actually provide an answer to a difficult question by philosophers however, as the above examples show it can be shown to have problems and the case may be that the three conditions of the definition may not be enough or may not actually be sufficient.