

How might we combat the Gettier Problem? In giving your answer set forth two of your own Gettier - Style counter examples.

Philosophers in the West at least since Socrates and Plato in the 4th century BCE have investigated the nature of knowledge. Since then, all of the great philosophers of the Western tradition have had a great deal to say about knowledge. However it was only until the nineteenth century that a separate sub-discipline called "theory of knowledge" or "**epistemology**" emerged.

One such definition of knowledge was offered by **Plato** in his book **Theaetetus**. This is known as the tripartite definition. Edmund **Gettier** (1963)³⁸ sets out to challenge this tripartite definition of knowledge which defines the logical argument of having knowledge as the following:

'S knows that *p*' as:

1. *p* is true.
2. *S* believes that *p*.
3. *S*'s belief that *p* is justified.

In accordance with the definition all the conditions must be met and to have knowledge one must have a true and justified belief of something. **Chisholm** has held that the above definition, and further states that they are **necessary** and **sufficient** conditions for knowledge. However Gettier using his own examples (henceforth known as **counter – examples**) shows that all the above three conditions can be satisfied and yet 'S' does not know 'P' and thus **does not** have knowledge.

According to the tripartite definition to have knowledge; we have to a justified true belief. This can be broken down and looked at in three parts. Part one; Beliefs can be described as something that we accept as true, these beliefs can come from many different sources such as other people, our senses or from reasoning. Part two of the tripartite definition is Truth. This is obviously something that we want from our beliefs. However the idea of truth itself is a controversial one. Philosophers such as Descartes would have us think that we have in fact no truths whatsoever and that we are full of falsehood. Yet for now we will assume that truth is good in its own right and that we can attain the concept of truth. The third and final part of the definition is that we need Justification. When we have good evidence and we have good reasoning of that evidence we can say that we are justified in our beliefs.

So in accordance with all the above, to have knowledge then it must be. A true and justified belief and these are necessary conditions, however are they sufficient? Gettier argues they are not. One such example of a Gettier – style counter example would be as follows,

John locks the door to his home and goes to work. John is now at work and looks at his key. He believes that it will open the door to his home, he is **justified** in believing this because of past evidence ... he has used this key many a time to open that door and so he **believes** it will open the lock which is on the door to his home. But suppose while he is at work, a locksmith comes and changes the lock to his door and replaces it with another lock. Yet John does not know this, he is still right to believe that the key will open the lock and it is still **true** that the key will open that lock. Therefore John has the a true, justified belief that the key will open the door to his home, thus it would be right to say John has knowledge as he has satisfied all the necessary conditions of truth according to the tripartite definition. However that knowledge is **false**. Because the key he has will still open that lock, however that lock is no longer in his door and therefore he is wrong to believe that key will open the door to his home.

Another such example would be the following;

This is example concerning whether an executive's secretary is in her office. Suppose that he looked into the office and saw, sitting behind the desk, a figure who looked to him exactly like his secretary. We may suppose that she would be completely justified in accepting that her secretary is in his office. However, it may be that the

person sitting at the desk is his secretary's identical twin sister. The real secretary is hiding behind the desk, waiting to leap up and surprise him. So it is true that the secretary is in the office, the executive accepts that it is true, and she is completely justified in so accepting that he is. So once again all the conditions are met however it is a false knowledge. To put the above into the logic argument we can see simply the tripartite definition falls short in its attempt to define knowledge.

'S knows that p ' as:

1. p is true.
2. S believes that p .
3. S 's belief that p is justified.

If we firstly put example one into the formula,

John knows that the key in his pocket will open the lock to his home

1. It is true that the key in John's pocket will open the lock,
2. John believes that the key will open the lock to his door
3. John's belief that the key will open the door is justified.

Therefore according to the tripartite definition he should have knowledge; however even though all the conditions are met he still does not have knowledge as it is not true that the key in his pocket will open the door to his home. The same applies to the second example given;

The executive know that his secretary is in her office,

1. The secretary is in her office
2. The executive beliefs that the secretary is her office
3. The executive's belief that the secretary is in the office is justified

However it cannot be said that the executive has the correct knowledge and once again the tripartite definition has been found not to be sufficient to define knowledge as in both the necessary conditions have been met yet it seems there are not enough sufficient conditions to define knowledge.

In summary both the above show Gettier counter - examples and are justified true beliefs which are not knowledge. There are three main ways we can combat the Gettier problem. The first would be to say; that we reject the examples by saying that they are not counter - examples and we say that the tripartite definition is still sufficient in defining knowledge and that it does not need to be amended. We can support this above argument by saying that John and the executive never have **True** knowledge and therefore they do not satisfy all the conditions of the tripartite definition. Because in both cases they assume they have the correct belief however this is not true and therefore they don't have knowledge.

However to do the above is not really good practice and is rather a weak argument as just to reject Gettier and say that the counter-examples as some valid points are made and it seems that even when all the conditions are satisfied the definition falls short.

Another way to combat the Gettier problems is to accept the counter - examples and say they are valid arguments and reject the original tripartite definition. To do this we can either add / alter the conditions of the definition or reject the tripartite definition completely and come up with a new definition which accounts for the Gettier counter - examples and still defines knowledge accurately. This as opposed to the solution proposed above would be good practice and would be evolving the area of epistemology, as the tripartite definition was first conceived by Plato in around 360 B.C.E. Therefore it could well be that the definition needs revising / remodelling. However it would have to encompass many of the points put forward by Plato and still be sufficient to combat the Gettier problem.

The third and final way we could combat the Gettier problem is to simply put forward the argument that Knowledge can not be defined. This is again a valid point as many have said that there is no concept of

knowledge and that it is not obtainable. Others would say that it is in fact obtainable however it is just a vast and engrossing concept that it can never be sufficiently defined, and some would go so far as to say that we do not need a definition of it. So basically we can obtain knowledge however we can never define it. At first glance it could be said that this option is again a weak argument and is not good practice however if we look more deeply we can see that it is indeed a valid argument as it is not simply a case of saying that the notion of knowledge is too hard to define, instead the argument put forward is stating that it is too vast a concept to even try and define and in fact we do not need to define. If we have not came up with a definition of it by now then why do we need one at all?

In looking at all the evidence it can be said that the examples put forward by Gettier are in fact valid and that they are genuine counter – examples to the tripartite definition and so that automatically rules out option one of trying to combat the Gettier problem (however it would not have been good practice to accept the first option anyway). So it is now a case of either accepting the second or third option. And it would seem from a philosophical point of view we would have to reject the third option given. As this states that there is no definition of knowledge and that in fact there is no need for a definition of knowledge. However it seems to accept option three would be a defeatist attitude and to simply say that we have been going years without the definition and that there is no need for it would be false. Because to accept that view is saying that one should accept the status quo and remain there and never progress and this is obviously not good philosophy.

So in closing it can be said that the Gettier examples given are valid and that we should try and combat this problem by taking option two – which is to either remodel the tripartite definition and add / modify some of the conditions. Alternatively scrap the tripartite model and simply use it as a building block in order to form another definition, one that combats the Gettier problem and one that does in fact define knowledge adequately.

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1. **Gettier, Edmund L.** *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* From *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123. Transcribed into hypertext by Andrew Chrucky, Sept. 13, 1997. (<http://www.ditext.com/gettier/gettier.html>)