

The Concept of Epistemic Justification and the Problem of Tripartite Conditions of Knowledge in Epistemology

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Abstract. In the recent epistemological debate over the rationality of justification of epistemic claims, there is much attempt to justify human claims to knowledge by determining the extent of the level of the role played by either reason or sense experience. This is in furtherance of widening the scope of justification of knowledge arising from the problem surrounding the rationality of knowledge right from the Socratic and Platonic period in ancient philosophy. This is given that there is a big gulf in the claims to knowledge and the evidence justifying such epistemic claims. For instance, Plato's traditional conception of knowledge of 'Justify True Belief' (JTB) popularly conceived and known as a 'tripartite condition of knowledge'; is an attempt to justify the rationality underlying true or justified epistemic claims in epistemology. On several grounds, this Platonic conception of knowledge had been questioned. For example, Edmund Gettier, an epistemologist, in his own challenge, argued that the tripartite criterion of knowledge offered by Plato is grossly inadequate and not sufficient enough to adjudge a true epistemic claim. It is on this ground that this paper examines the concept of epistemic claim to knowledge and the tripartite criteria arising from Plato's attempt to justify the claim to knowledge in epistemology.

Keywords: Epistemology, Knowledge, Tripartite, Justification, and Reason

1. Introduction

In this paper, there is an attempt to justify human claims to knowledge by determining the extent of the role played by either reason or the sense experience. Also, effort is made in the piece to examine and evaluate the traditional conception of knowledge as offered by Plato in his tripartite condition of knowledge. Thus, it is our position in this paper that why Plato's tripartite criterion of knowledge claim serves as a necessary paradigm to epistemic foundation for knowledge claims it is not a sufficient condition for justification of knowledge given various challenges arising from tripartite condition offered by Plato.

1.1 The Concept of Epistemic Justification

The concept of justification is paramount in the analysis of knowledge which is of utmost concern to epistemologists. That is the reason why the concept of knowledge is fundamental to epistemologists. It is no doubt, that philosophers have been obsessed with understanding and achieving propositional knowledge since Plato in the *Theaetetus* 2,500 years ago about What must be added to true belief to arrive at knowledge, not just knowledge but indubitable knowledge? In the history of epistemology, particularly before the twentieth century, explicit reference to justification, reasons for believing, or probability was much rarer than it is today. Certainly, the primary focus was knowledge. Indeed, if knowledge is the subject of epistemological investigation, it is in many ways the most puzzling, even though a number of philosophers have argued that it should be of

secondary interest to the epistemologists. That is, epistemologists should be more concerned with epistemic reasons for belief (Fumerton, 2006: 12). In such sense, all our decisions certainly need to be justified.

The view that knowledge consists of ‘Justified-True-Belief’ has attracted considerable attention in its own right. However, it is usually not at all clear and debatable what epistemologists mean by “justified”. An enormous amount of energy has gone into the attempt to specify conditions under which beliefs of one or another sort are justified; but relatively little has been done to explain what it is for a belief to be justified. The most common procedure has been to proceed on the basis of a number of obvious cases of ‘Justified Belief’, without considering what property to be determined in these instances.

Plato’s search for a condition that must be added to ‘True Belief’ in order to get knowledge suggests that in order to know we must at the very least believe a true proposition. Here, “belief” is observed to be too weak. Indeed, when we go out of our way to indicate that we merely believe a proposition, we are often trying to warn the person to whom we are talking that we lack adequate knowledge for upholding a claim or the truth of a proposition. For instance, I was asked a question “Do you know if the school opens on Sundays?” And I answered thus “I believe that it does”. In such a case, it shows that I do not have enough knowledge or claim to justify the claim. In any event, at least in some contexts, we seem to require something more like subjective *certainty* in order to have knowledge; where subjective certainty is a belief-like state (an absolutely firm conviction with no trace of doubt) (Fumerton, 2006: 12).

The so-called truth condition for knowledge seems relatively unproblematic but in analysis controversial. To Richard Fumerton “knowledge is what some philosophers call a *factive state*; that is, a propositional knowledge” (Fumerton, 2006: 12). That is, the knowledge that something is the case conveys that which can be true or false. He goes further to state that the propositional that:

Someone S can know that P, believing that P, desires that P, hopes that P, fears that P, be proud of the fact that P, regrets that P, perceives that P, remembers that P, and so on. Some of these descriptions of people can only be true if P is true. Others can be true if P is true whether or not P is true. If the description of the state can only be true if P is true, the state is regarded as been *factive*. (Fumerton, 2006: 12-13).

Just as in the case of Edmund Gettier. Knowledge is at least True Belief, or believing a true proposition, but rarely have philosophers’ thought that True Belief is sufficient for knowledge. There are at least two types of cases of True Belief that fail to reach the level of knowing. One is the case of getting a true belief completely by luck. For instance, by a lucky guess. One might guess that the number of cars in the parking lot is 167 and have the urge to believe the guess, but even if the guess comes out to be correct, the fact still remains that the person guessing surely does not know that there are 167 cars in the lot in the first instance. The second type is the case of unconscientiously True belief. In this case, a Clifford’s ship owner agrees that the ship owner did not know that his ship was seaworthy even if it was seaworthy. The reason is that he lacked adequate grounds for the belief; for this, he was regarded to be intellectually careless and was probably indulging in nothing but wishful thinking.

However, *propositional knowledge* always involves somebody's knowing *that* something or other is so. As such, it is logically distinct from *non-propositional knowledge*, which is a matter of somebody's knowing *how* to do something or other (Robert, 1996: 9). Here, there is need to focus on non-basic propositional knowledge, that is, propositional knowledge produced by conscious inference from evidence consisting of other known propositions. Such knowledge is regarded as *demonstrative knowledge*. In explicating the nature of non-basic propositional knowledge, it is imperative to know that there are both a weak and a strong sense of 'knows', that there is a concept of knowing weakly and a concept of knowing strongly. Knowing weakly differs from knowing strongly in two basic ways. In the first place, knowing strongly does

require that the evidence condition for knowledge be satisfied by evidence that is *entailing* whereas, knowing weakly does not. In the second place, although knowledge cannot be false in any sense of 'knows', a proper analysis of the weak sense of 'knows' is inconsistent with adopting any correspondence theory of truth. Indeed, if the weak sense of 'knows' admits of instantiation (if, that is, there is non-basic knowledge that does not require *entailing* evidence), then we cannot explicate the sense in which such knowledge is true by appeal to any correspondence theory of truth. This latter conclusion, however, does not hold with regard to a proper analysis of the strong sense of 'knows'. After examining and rejecting various objections to our characterization of the weak sense of 'knows', it is important to note that with explicit definitions of both senses of 'knows' and an argument to the effect that although there are two senses of 'knows', there is only one kind of non-basic factual knowledge, namely the kind specified by the weak sense of 'knows'. From this conclusion, it emerges that the weak sense of 'knows' does, but the strong sense does not, admit of instantiation with respect to non-basic factual knowledge claims (Almender, 1992: 1-2). Typically, if a person claims to know something or other on the basis of some evidence he states, and if we have no good reason to suppose that he is not in a position to know what he claims to know, then we do not dispute, deny, or otherwise question his claim to know unless, after examining his evidence, we have some specific reason for thinking that what he claims to know may actually be false.

Furthermore, Hume is noted to have championed the idea of irrationalism based on his position that since reason leads to solipsism and skepticism, we must reject reason. But we cannot actually be solipsists or skeptics. In the philosophical terrain, we convince one another that belief in anything beyond our own impressions and ideas is rationally unfounded. But we cannot persist in this conclusion for more than a moment: human nature or custom or instinct takes over, and we find ourselves believing once again in all sorts of things which philosophy declares unreasonable. Skepticism and solipsism are the most reasonable views to

Hume but stated that human nature compels us to be unreasonable (Alan, 1993: 147). Hume goes further to sum up his ideas in the *Treatise* as follows:

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another...He posited that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium... I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appears so cold, strained and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into than any further. Here, I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life... I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles (*Treatise*, i, iv, 7: 268-269).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Hume's position is in two parts. On the one hand, he asks what we all believe and why we all believe it and cannot help but believing it. On the other hand, he asks whether these natural or instinctive beliefs can be rationally justified. His answer to this second evaluative question is invariably a negative one; which shows that we cannot help but having unreasonable beliefs. The Greeks thought man was by nature a rational animal but Hume thought man was by nature an irrational animal (Alan, 1993: 148).

2. Knowledge as Justified True Belief

There are three components to the traditional ("tripartite") analysis of knowledge. The tripartite analysis of knowledge is often abbreviated as the "JTB" analysis, for "Justified True Belief". The *JTB account* of knowledge is the claim that knowledge can be conceptually analyzed as Justified True Belief. By this

account the *meaning* of a sentence such as "Smith knows that it rained today" can be given with the following set of necessary and sufficient conditions:

A subject *S* knows that a proposition *P* is true if and only if:

P is true, and Truth Condition →
S believes that *P* is true, and → Belief Condition
S is justified in believing that *P* is true
 → Justification Condition

The objective of the analysis of knowledge is to state the conditions that are singly necessary and jointly sufficient for propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge should be distinguished from knowledge of "acquaintance", just as the case when one says that Susan knows Alyssa. Subject to some debate is the relation between propositional knowledge and the knowledge at issue in other "knowledge" locutions in English, such as knowledge-where (Susan knows where she is) and especially knowledge-how (Susan knows how to ride a bicycle) (Almender, 1999). The analysis of knowledge is in the form "*S* knows that *p*," where "*S*" is referred to knowing subject, and "*p*" to the proposition that is known.

From this analysis of knowledge would do more than pick out the actual extension of knowledge. Suppose that all cases of *S* knowing that *p* are cases of *j*, and all cases of the latter are cases of the former, *j* might fail as an analysis of knowledge. For example, its might be that there are possible cases of knowledge without *j*, or vice versa. A proper analysis of knowledge should at least be a necessary truth. However, hypothetical thought experiments provide appropriate test cases for various analyses.

3. The Truth Condition

Condition (i) of the JTB, the truth condition, is largely uncontroversial as it asserts the truth condition that needs to be fulfilled by any form of statement. Therefore, the truth condition of a statement is the condition that the world must meet if the statement is to be true (Blackburn, 2005). It is on this note that Plato defines truth as: to know what is, that it is, what is not that it

is not is truth. However, most epistemologists have found it overwhelmingly plausible that what is false cannot be known. For example, G. E. Moore buttresses the claim that what is false cannot be known in his work *Sense and Sensibilia*. Since it is false, it is not the sort of thing anybody knows. Allan Hazlett (2010) argues further that "know" is not a factive verb, on the basis of the apparent felicity of utterances like: "Everyone knew that stress caused ulcers, before two Australian doctors in the early 80s proved that ulcers are actually caused by bacterial infection" (Hazlett, 2010:501)

Hazlett's position is highly controversial; even it, however, is not meant to deny the truth condition in the tripartite theory of knowledge. Hazlett takes these considerations about the *factivity* of the English verb "know" to motivate divorcing such semantic considerations from knowledge, the state of traditional epistemic interest. Even though the word "know" is, according to Hazlett, not a *factive* verb, even he accepts that knowledge itself is a state that can only obtain if its content is true.

Some other philosophers will argue that one can know something that is false and that truth is not a necessary condition of knowledge. Alston in this regard points to the fact that:

Another possible avenue of resistance to the truth condition on knowledge derives from our apparent knowledge of false empirical theories. For example, it is intuitively plausible that Newtonian Physics is part of our overall scientific knowledge. But Newtonian Physics is false. So is it possible to know something false after all? (Alston, 1991).

In response, it is important to remember that the JTB theory is an attempt to explicate propositional knowledge, not knowledge by acquaintance. In what sense is Newtonian Physics part of our knowledge? If it is merely that we are familiar with Newtonian Physics, the JTB theory is silent; knowing Newtonian Physics in this sense does not require Newtonian Physics to be true anymore than knowing Alyssa requires Alyssa to be true. If we specify the content of our purported knowledge, the objection has much less intuitive bite: it is not

particularly plausible that we know that Newtonian Physics is true.

In view of this analysis of the notion of truth, Plato offers that whatever is claimed to be true propositionally must by modal status be known to rationally true and not just by sense experience. Nevertheless, several notions and theories of truth like correspondence, coherence, semantic and pragmatic theories of truth do not only appear to fall within this truth criterion offered by Plato but also reinforce the grounds for justifying truth and / or true claims to knowledge in epistemology.

4. The Belief Condition

This is the second condition offered by Plato's tripartite condition for justifying epistemic claims to knowledge. However, the belief condition is slightly more controversial than the truth condition, although it is certainly accepted by orthodoxy (an idea or view that is generally accepted). Initially, it might seem obvious that knowing that p requires believing that p , some philosophers have argued that knowledge without belief is indeed possible. Suppose Walter comes home after work to find out that his house has burned down. He says: "I don't believe it." Critics of the belief condition might argue that Walter knows that his house has burned down (he sees that it has), but, as his words indicate, he does not believe that his house has burned down. Therefore, there is knowledge without belief. The dominant view, however, is that Walter's avowal of disbelief is not, strictly speaking, literally true; what Walter wishes to convey by saying "I don't believe it" is not that he really does not believe that his house has burned down, rather that he finds it hard to come to terms with what he sees. If he did not genuinely believe it, some of his subsequent actions, such as phoning his insurance company, would be rather mysterious.

By and large, the belief condition of the JTB is strongly a supporting condition for the justification of knowledge. So, within the context of the Plato's epistemological paradigm, the belief condition purports that only true beliefs that are properly investigated and

confirmed to be true are the ones that can count and reinforce the rationality of any true claims. This is given that there are so many beliefs whose modal status is 'false' thus not corresponding to any fact in the experiential world.

5. The Justification Condition

The justification condition is the third condition offered by Plato in his tripartite condition for knowledge. Plato in *Theaetetus*, while articulating the need for justification condition in any epistemic claim points out that 'true opinion' and 'true belief' are in general insufficient for knowledge until they are justified. For example, if a lawyer employs sophistry to induce a jury into a belief that something happens to be true, this belief is insufficiently well-grounded to constitute knowledge.

Before turning to the arguments against the JTB theory, let us briefly consider some fundamental questions about the components of the tripartite condition of knowledge in turn. For instance, why is justification condition necessary? Why not say that knowledge is true belief? The standard answer is that to identify knowledge with true belief would be implausible because a belief might be true even though it is formed improperly. Suppose that William flips a coin, and confidently believes on no particular basis that it will land tails. If by chance the coin does land tails, then William's belief was true; but a lucky guess such as this one is no knowledge. For William to know, his belief must in some epistemic sense be proper or appropriate: it must be *justified* (Bird, 2007: 81)

By notion of evidence, Conee and Feldman (2009), as internalists, posit that only intrinsic states of the subject constitute an evidence for the reality of the subject so referred. For example, given a proposition that S 's belief that p is justified if and only if believing that p is the attitude towards p that best fits S 's evidence, where the latter is understood to depend only on S 's internal mental states. On the other hand, *externalists* on justification of epistemic claims are of the view that what constitute evidence are

factors external to the subject. Contrary to the views of the internalist and externalist epistemologists, reliabilists are of the position that justified beliefs are those beliefs which are formed by a cognitive process and which tend to produce a high proportion of true beliefs relative to false ones (Goldman, 2011: 293).

It is worth noting that one might distinguish between two importantly different notions of justification, standardly referred to as “propositional justification” and “doxastic justification” Unlike the internalist and externalist approaches to justification, the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification does not represent a conflict to be resolved; rather, it is a distinction between two distinct properties that are called ‘justification’. “Propositional justification concerns whether a subject has sufficient reason to believe a given proposition while doxastic justification concerns whether a given belief is held appropriately” (Sutton, 2007). One common way of relating the two is to suggest that propositional justification is more fundamental, and that doxastic justification is a matter of a subject's having a belief that is appropriately responsive to or based on propositional justification.

In view of this foregoing analysis, Jonathan and Steup stipulate that the relation between propositional and doxastic justification is subject to controversy even though the two notions can be separated (Jonathan & Steup, 2014). They cite this example that “suppose that Ingrid ignores a great deal of excellent evidence indicating that a given neighbourhood is dangerous, but superstitiously comes to believe that the neighbourhood is dangerous when she sees a black cat crossing the street” (Jonathan & Steup, 2014). Since forming beliefs on the basis of superstition is not an appropriate epistemic way of forming beliefs, Ingrid's belief is not doxastically justified; nevertheless, she *does* have good reason to believe as she does. However, since knowledge is a particularly successful kind of belief, doxastic justification appears justified within the context of traditional tripartite theory.

6. The Refutation of the Tripartite Conditions

The question of the conditions that must be met for something to really qualify as “knowledge” is as old as philosophy itself, and is a constant theme of Plato's dialogues, notably *Meno* (97a-98b). In the *Theatetus: A Dialogue*, Plato outlines three conditions for knowledge in form of propositions which are; (i) truth condition; (ii) Belief condition and (iii) Justification condition. In his short article, “*Is justified True Belief Knowledge?*” Gettier raises some fundamental objections to the tripartite conception of knowledge.

Against the above conditions, Gettier gave two scenarios where the three criteria (justification, truth, and belief) seemed to be met, but where the majority of readers would not have felt that the result was knowledge due to the element of luck involved. This is what has been popularly called the ‘Gettier problem’. The Gettier problem is a philosophical question about whether a piece of information that happens to be true but that someone believes for invalid reasons, such as a faulty premise, counts as knowledge.

The phrase, Gettier problem, is sometimes used to cover any one of a category of thought experiment in contemporary epistemology that seem to repudiate a definition of knowledge as justified true belief. The responses to Gettier's paper have been numerous. While some scholars rejected Gettier's examples, many sought to adjust the JTB account of knowledge to lessen the impact of both Gettier's own problems and other problems (collectively titled “Gettier problems”). Since 1963, experiments have also been conducted to determine whether the instinctive reactions of those presented with a Gettier problem are uniform or display language or genetic biases.

The more specific problem Gettier raises was also raised by Bertrand Russell in *The Problems of Philosophy* (McGrew, 2007). In Russell's stopped clock case, as modified by Israel Scheffler Alice sees a clock that reads two o'clock. She believes its two o'clock, and that is

true. However, unknown to Alice, the clock she's looking at stopped twelve hours ago. So, she has an accidentally true, justified belief. Russell provides an answer of his own to the problem. Edmund Gettier's formulation of the problem was important as it coincided with the rise of the sort of philosophical naturalism promoted by W. V. O. Quine and others, and was used as a justification for a shift towards externalist theories of justification. John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz have stated that the Gettier problem has "fundamentally altered the character of contemporary epistemology" and has become "a central problem of epistemology since it poses a clear barrier to analyzing knowledge" (Pollock, 1999: 13-14).

Alvin Plantinga re-modifies the historical analysis of knowledge:

According to the inherited lore of the epistemological tribe, the JTB [justified true belief] account enjoyed the status of epistemological orthodoxy until 1963, when it was shattered by Edmund Gettier... Of course there is an interesting historical irony here: it isn't easy to find many really explicit statements of a JTB analysis of knowledge prior to Gettier. It is almost as if a distinguished critic created a tradition in the very act of destroying it (Plantinga, 1992: 6).

Despite this, Plantinga *does* accept that some philosophers before Gettier have advanced a Justified True Belief account of knowledge. Specifically, C. I. Lewis, on the account that (i) that there is a 'Given' element in empirical knowledge to gain impression and that (ii) that "our knowledge of the external world can be justified, only by indubitable apprehensions of the immediate data of sense (Eric, 1995: 254) is believed to be one of those foundationalists who grounded knowledge in sense data.

7. The Critique of the Refutation of Tripartite Condition

Jonathan Dancy is one of those philosophers critiquing Gettier's counter-arguments against the tripartite criteria for knowledge. This is with the argument that absence of falsehood is an attempt at repairing the traditional account of

knowledge. In this vein, Jonathan Dancy posits that the definition of knowledge should indicate that the components belief should not be inferred from a false belief (Dancy, 1985: 30). In the same vein, Michael Clark opines that the believer's ground for believing a claim must not include any false belief (Clark, 1963:46).

Furthermore, Jonathan Dancy offers defeasibility theory in relation to determining the validation of subject to defeat by further considerations of facts and evidence (Dancy, 1985). For example, some explanations of an assertion's sense refer to what could give the assertion evidential, inferential warrant or certainty, albeit a warrant can be defeasible by further evidence or considerations (Baker, 1977). The defeasibility theory reinforces the justification of knowledge with the claims that knowledge is attainable only if the justification were not defeated by the additional true pieces of information or assertion (Grundmann, 2011:157).

Besides, Dancy is of the view that a justified truth or claim to knowledge should be able to meet the reliability condition. This is against the backdrop that what makes a belief justified within traditional epistemology is the fact that the believer's rationality and responsibility must lie within the cognitive grasp. That is, for a belief to be justified, the believer must be aware of what makes an assertion justified. It is on this note that reliability theory holds that a belief can be justified if found to rely on a reliable process that is based on rational and / or empirical justification.

8. Concluding Remarks

Given our presentation in this paper, it is argued that Plato's tripartite condition of knowledge offers a ground and a necessary paradigm for epistemic evaluation of the truth and what constitute knowledge in the field of epistemology. That notwithstanding, the respite and the ground offered by Plato's (JTB) criteria for knowledge are found not to be sufficient enough for justification of knowledge given various challenges arising from this tripartite condition. Even with this inadequacy, as well as

Edmund Gettier's additional condition and Dancy contributions to the criteria of epistemic justification. It is our contention that there are no absolute criteria that are holistic enough to address the question of epistemic justification. This is why there have been several epistemological criteria in the contemporary epistemology as additional formulations to strengthen the criteria of evaluation of statement claims, beliefs and truth in epistemology. It is for this reason that such epistemic theories like contextualism, pragmatism, foundationalism, coherentism *et.al* have emerged as an additional force for strengthening the question and the problem of epistemic justification.

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