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“Is justified true belief knowledge?” Edmund L. Gettier Analysis 23 Vol. 23, No. 6 (Oxford University press, June 1963), p. 121.)

The Small Certainty of Experiencing

In this conundrum of complex philosophical concepts lies a question which in many ways is the most important question to philosophy as a whole. Namely, what is knowledge, and how can we know if our knowledge is indeed true? As philosophy means “love for knowledge”, true knowledge is in a sense the building block of all philosophical inquiry. Edmund L. Gettier asks whether “justified true belief” could constitute knowledge, and there is an interesting nuance in this question which is different from a usual epistemological discussion of knowledge. The question asks if belief could count as knowledge if it is “justified” and “true”. At first glance, one could think this might actually be something I could simply solve from the words’ respective definition. If I define knowledge as “something known about concepts or the world which is correct”, and true as “something which is not false”, then the definitions would lead to the conclusion that if something is true, it is knowledge. However, how do I know that a belief is both justified and true? By looking at our different criteria for and criticism of knowledge, I will in this essay try to find out how our belief could be justified and true in the sense that it would count as knowledge.

Today our prime example of knowledge, what most people would agree is knowledge which is correct in relation to the physical world, is the conclusions from science. Science is based on the hypothetical deductive method, which means a scientist presents a falsifiable hypothesis about something in the physical world and then conducts an experiment to test whether this hypothesis is correct in accordance with reality. Other scientists try to conduct this experiment in the same manner, and if enough scientist test a hypothesis and gets the same conclusion, we can consider the conclusion a theory. This is not knowledge in the absolute sense, but it is the closest we can get to knowledge of the physical world. But science, as every branch of knowledge we, relies on certain criteria and presuppositions to conclude that its knowledge is correct. In order to believe that the conclusions from science are knowledge, we have to presuppose that there is a physical world and that what we observe about this physical world is

correct. This raises the question of whether we can only have knowledge in accordance with certain presuppositions we have to believe without any justification, and if this means the “justified” true belief we have in science might not be knowledge?

Trying to untangle this question by looking at the history of philosophy, a natural place to start would be Plato and his concept of Forms. For Plato, there exist an eternal unquestionable true concept behind every physical thing and abstract concept, from the shoe you wear to the justice you might believe in. This means that truth is knowledge of these eternal forms, and everything a scientist might conclude about the physical world would one be imperfect belief based on their observations. These observations are in their nature flawed, as the scientist is observing something which is removed from the true basis of knowledge. No matter if we accept Plato’s argument about Forms or not, his thought reveals that knowledge might be compared to different foundations. Whether our justified true beliefs are knowledge varies according to which foundation we base our definition of knowledge on, and Plato’s foundation for knowledge is almost entirely contrary to that of studying the physical world.

The doubt which comes from this realisation is taken to its extreme with David Hume and his scepticism. Hume was an empiricist and believed we can only gain knowledge through our senses. However, Hume was also a scepticist, meaning he doubted whether our senses revealed anything about the world which was actually true. For example, when we look at a stick beneath water it looks like it bends as it touches the water. This bending is however only an illusion created by our eyes, and there are many other examples of our senses not showing reality correctly. Hume concludes that what we believe might seem both justified and true, but that it is never certain knowledge. Immanuel Kant responds to this by arguing that reality is divided into the phenomenal world, how the world seems to humans, and the noumenal world, how the world actually exists. Kant argues that we can have knowledge of *das Ding für mich*, meaning what is in the phenomenal world, since the world as it appears to us is by definition the world as it appears to us. However, we cannot have knowledge about *das Ding an sich*, the thing in itself, because being tied by our human perspective means we can never access the noumenal world. Therefore, Kant follows Plato in the sense that we can have justified true belief which equals knowledge. However, this belief can never reach the Noumenal world, meaning he differs from Plato in that he thinks we can never gain knowledge about true reality.

In Kant's division of the world into a real world and an apparent world one could perhaps recognise a fundamental problem in the search for knowledge. Since we have this wish to possess a knowledge which is absolutely certain, spending time trying to justify absolute knowledge leads to us getting farther and farther away from our actual basis for knowledge. From Kant we can get a certain justification of our knowledge of the physical world, and the criteria of a justified and true belief would be a belief which is rationally founded and in accordance with the physical world. This is the definition which modern science to a certain degree follows, and which would be most commonly accepted today. Following the perspective of science and materialism, we can also see that we could go further than Kant and assert that there is no need for a noumenal world, and that knowledge of the physical world is what knowledge is. As we have seen in our discussion of science, this knowledge would constantly need to be tested, and therefore the Platonic concept of true knowledge is replaced by reasonable possibility. But from this definition of justifiable knowledge comes the still need to face the presupposition that the physical world indeed exists, and whether we can say anything about the physical world without having examined what we observe of the physical world through our mind.

As humans we have our own perspective tied to every thought and observation we make. Descartes noted this when he concluded that the only thing we could justifiably know was that we are thinking, and since there has to be something existing doing this thinking, we have to exist. Cogito, ergo sum. But within Descartes' conclusion lies quite a few presuppositions of his own. Namely that "I" am this thing which is thinking, and that thinking is as certain a foundation for our experience of the physical world as Descartes thought. To the contrary, one could argue that having a subjective first-person point of view, experiencing that I am, precedes that fact that I can think. In this sense, the subjective first-person experience of the world called consciousness also precedes perceiving the world. Conscious experience creates a huge problem in simply justifying the knowledge we gain from science in Kant's belief that we can have imperfect knowledge of the physical world, for it leads us back to the problem of knowing that the physical world is real.

To get out of this spiral of uncertainty I will try to look at if we can find a foundation for truth in the fact that everything we see is from our own subjective perspective. Our fundamental experiencing may of course lead to absolute idealism, meaning the physical world is simply a creation of our own consciousness. A common ground can, however, be found if we do assume that every human has this conscious first-person perspective of the world. This might be a big

assumption, but to have a true and justified knowledge, I believe we must base it on the very premise of us being able to think about these questions, and communicate at all, which is consciousness. How one might base knowledge on consciousness is a problem which I currently have no answer to, but the fact that all I do and think is based on the fact that I experiencing consciousness seems like a basis which all the other forms of knowledge discussed are also based upon. There is no doubt that also consciousness leads to a vast array of philosophical problems, the most prominent being the mind-body problem and reconciling mind and materialism. However, when discussing certain knowledge and if knowledge can be true or justified, I think it is important to acknowledge that although we have to assume some facts about the physical world as knowledge, whether we can absolute base this knowledge seems almost contrary to the uncertain nature of the world.

The conclusion is then that justified true belief might be knowledge depending on our criteria for defining what knowledge is. The doubt about both our senses and the capabilities of our rationality to go beyond our senses creates a real, and in perhaps impossible, problem of whether we can ever attain real knowledge. However, we find in Kant some certainty, if we define knowledge as belief which is rationally founded and in accordance with the physical world. No matter if this is true in the absolute sense, it lets us act as if the physical world is real. But whether this belief is true and justified is another matter entirely. What we do have, however, is the small certainty that we are in fact experiencing being, that we experience being conscious. And combined with using science to discover the physical world, this experience might be the key to sometime grounding our knowledge.