Marianne Talbot Essay Prize Trinity 2026

Third Prize: Lydia Torres

Describe and explain why Gettier-style cases demonstrate that the Tripartite Account of Knowledge is unsustainable. How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases, do you think? Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

What is knowledge? Philosophy has traditionally answered this question through conceptual analysis, attempting to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a true belief constitutes knowledge. For the first half of the twentieth century the Tripartite Account of Knowledge was considered the correct analysis. This account holds that an agent (A) knows a proposition (p) if and only if A believes p, p is true, and A has justification for believing p. As such, it is often called the Justified True Belief (JTB) analysis. However, this analysis was threatened by Gettier's cases.

In 1963, a paper called *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* by Edmund Gettier, challenged the Tripartite Account of Knowledge with only two counterexamples, later known as Gettier cases and both sharing the same basic structure: the subject holds a justified true belief, yet the belief is true only because of luck.

Gettier (1963) argued that justification alone cannot rule out luck. For this reason, luck - later called *epistemic luck* - can make a belief true by coincidence, even when it is well justified, because the proper connection between justification and truth is broken. That is why the subject satisfies all three conditions of the JTB account, and yet we still have the intuition that there is no knowledge because the truth of the belief depends on luck rather than justification. Consequently, numerous philosophical proposals emerged to rescue or fix the JTB account.

I will examine these proposals because they illustrate a recurring pattern in epistemology: each attempt to solve the limitations of the previous account deepened our understanding of knowledge.

Gettier did not offer an alternative account of knowledge. Many attempts were made to fix or revise the JTB analysis. This opened the beginning of a philosophical puzzle that continues to this day.

Since the two original Gettier cases both involve reasoning from a false belief, the No False Lemmas proposal attempted to rescue the JTB analysis by adding a fourth condition. A true belief does not count as knowledge if it is based on any false belief. According to this proposal, by eliminating any false belief from the reasoning process of the agent, the element of epistemic luck present in the original Gettier cases would also be removed. As a result, the two original Gettier cases, together with all counterexamples that share the same structure, would be ruled out. This promising proposal proved convincing because it shifted the focus of the debate by attempting to identify a common feature that could explain the original Gettier cases. However, new counterexamples were developed which showed that a belief could still be true by luck without involving a false lemma. To make this clearer, consider the following slightly adapted version of Chisholm's famous "sheep in the field" case (1966):

Suppose someone looks into a garden and sees what appears to be a large Maine Coon cat. She then forms the true belief that there is a Maine Coon in the garden. Unknown to her, what she sees is actually a dog in disguise. However, a real Maine Coon is sleeping elsewhere in the garden. This means that her belief is true but only because of luck. She then forms the

belief that there is a cat and grass is green. This belief is formed from her knowledge that grass is green and the lucky belief that there is a cat. The belief is true, justified, and no false beliefs were involved in forming her belief but it does not seem like knowledge.

This suggests that No False Lemmas cannot fully solve Gettier cases simply by adding the condition that there are no false assumptions, since eliminating false assumptions does not eliminate epistemic luck.

The limitations of No False Lemmas therefore led philosophers to seek alternative ways of connecting true belief with reality. One influential response was Goldman's Reliabilism that proposed a change of approach. He argued in favour of analysing whether a belief comes from a reliable cognitive process, maintaining that these processes normally produce true beliefs.

According to this view, if a belief is produced by a process that normally leads to true beliefs, it is less likely to be true simply by luck. This theory shifts the focus from justification to the reliability of the cognitive process that produces the belief because the subject does not need to know or justify why the process is reliable, making the connection between the belief and truth less accidental. As a result, many Gettier cases based on accidental reasoning or false lemmas are no longer problematic, since what matters is the reliability of the cognitive process itself.

That is why this theory reduces the role of epistemic luck, but not completely, as it is still open to cases where there is no knowledge because truth depends on luck, as Russell's stopped clock example (1948) illustrates:

Suppose someone looks at a stopped clock that, unknown to them, happens to display the correct time. They form the true belief that it is three o'clock. Although checking a clock is normally a reliable cognitive process, the belief is true only because of luck.

This example shows that Reliabilism still leaves room for epistemic luck, since a generally reliable cognitive process can still produce a true belief merely by luck in particular circumstances.

Although Reliabilism does not eliminate all cases of epistemic luck, it shows that the origin of a belief is philosophically important and that reliable cognitive processes strengthen the connection between belief and truth. In this respect, it represented a significant advance over No False Lemmas.

The counterexample cases left unresolved by Reliabilism led to further advances. A key example is Sosa’s version of Virtue Epistemology, a quite different proposal which does not add another condition to the JTB account and holds that truth should not be an accident but an intellectual achievement.

One feature of Sosa's Virtue Epistemology is the emphasis on adroitness, a competent exercise of the subject's cognitive abilities and intellectual skills. This builds upon the advance made by Reliabilism by showing that a true belief does not constitute knowledge simply because it is true or results from a reliable process. Instead, a belief constitutes knowledge only when it is true because of the subject's cognitive abilities. In this case, the agent deserves epistemic credit, since the success of the belief is attributable to them rather than to luck.

For this reason, it clearly represents an advance beyond Reliabilism as it offers the most sophisticated attempt to respond to Gettier-style cases, making the connection between belief and truth stronger. Virtue Epistemology approaches knowledge in a way we have not seen before, expanding our understanding of knowledge beyond justification and reliability.

Despite this, some Gettier-style cases still remain, in which the subject exercises their cognitive abilities competently, yet there is still no knowledge.

The philosophical responses discussed in this essay show that each stage of the debate has contributed to a deeper understanding of knowledge. While No False Lemmas helped us understand that eliminating false assumptions is not sufficient, Reliabilism showed that the origin of knowledge also matters, and Virtue Epistemology deepened our understanding of knowledge by emphasising intellectual achievement. This suggests that a more satisfactory theory of knowledge remains possible, as each new proposal gets a closer connection between belief and truth.

The continuing development of epistemology gives us reason to remain optimistic about the possibility of achieving a more satisfactory analysis of knowledge, even if no theory can be considered definitive, as our understanding of knowledge continues to evolve.

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