

Knowledge as Subjectively Justified True Belief (SJTB)

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Introduction

The justified true belief (JTB) account of knowledge in epistemology stipulates that a claim constitutes knowledge if it is believed, justified and true. In 1963, Edmund Gettier challenged this account by citing cases of JTB which we would not intuitively describe as knowledge. In these cases, the subjects have a JTB about something yet cannot be said to *know* it because, while they have reasons for holding that belief, those reasons happen to be false. Gettier counterexamples seem to reveal that the JTB account of knowledge is not robust; it lacks certain necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. A litany of attempts to revise or amend the JTB account of knowledge has been made in response to Gettier's challenge. Many provide ad hoc Gettier-oriented qualifications. Alternatively, new accounts of knowledge have been advanced such as those within the newly revived discipline of virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemologists like Zagzebski argue that knowledge is an "epistemic good" that is somehow "better than mere true belief" and orients her theory of knowledge around this normative conception (2003, 12). This paper will advance an alternative account of knowledge as subjectively justified true belief (SJTB) inspired by the phenomenological ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre. Moreover, this paper will make the case that knowledge can be classified as 'objective' if and only if it is intersubjectively valid. A framework for comparing and classifying knowledge will be developed and used to explain how Gettier cases are not problems for this theory but merely cases where knowledge is not intersubjectively valid.

1. Defining Knowledge

The problem of defining knowledge is central in epistemology. This paper will restrict its focus to propositional or descriptive knowledge– a 'knowing-that'

which may be articulated in a declarative sentence— as opposed to ability knowledge or ‘know-how’. Traditionally, propositional knowledge has been interpreted to be a locus of truth. There is consensus in the literature that “[i]n order to have knowledge of a proposition, that proposition must be true, and one must believe it” (Pritchard 2006, 8). However, epistemologists generally argue that mere true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, rather, the belief must be justified; it must be held for some intelligible reason. Thus, it is generally accepted that “justification is necessary for knowledge” (ibid., 34). Gettier challenged the JTB account of knowledge by providing counterexamples. Consider the following Gettier case: S has a justified belief that p, where p refers to the state of affairs in which someone in S’s office owns a Ford (Gettier 2002). The evidence S has for this belief— how p is known to be true *for S*— concerns S’s coworker Nogot. It happens to be true that someone in S’s office owns a ford. However, that person is not Nogot but Haveit. S has a JTB, yet it does not seem to qualify as knowledge. The literature argues that “understanding what constitutes justification is essential to understanding what constitutes knowledge” (Pritchard, 34). The problem of delineating what constitutes justification has created an impasse between epistemologists who hold internalist and externalist positions. This debate, as it features in the literature, concerns the subject’s cognitive access to justifiers— those factors that justify one’s belief or knowledge claim (Goldman 1980, 30; Bonjour 1980). The ‘justification’ we are discussing here is not a moral or pragmatic justification but *epistemic* justification, which is related to the “cognitive goal of truth” (Bonjour 1980, 54). Szalek elucidates that “[i]nternalism is a position which holds that a believer must have cognitive access to justifiers, i.e. such factors that are justifying her beliefs. Externalism rejects this requirement” (2008, 146). For the internalist, justifiedness for one’s belief is a function of the cognizer’s *internal* processes and *awareness* of the evidence or reasons supporting their belief. Alternatively, awareness of or cognitive access to justifiers is not necessary for externalists. Rather, epistemic justification derives from mere correspondence of one’s belief to truth, determined by factors or conditions *external* to the cognizer. This paper argues that the debate regarding the

nature and degree of one's cognitive access to justifiers is inconsequential. In the following section, I will advance an account of knowledge that hinges on the Sartrean idea that conscious subjects are essentially 'knowing' beings such that all conscious experience already entails knowledge. Accordingly, all knowledge is inherently justified for the knowing subject.

2. Knowledge as SJTB

In attempting to delineate the concept of knowledge, this paper stipulates a necessary condition for something to constitute 'knowledge': for anything to be knowledge it must necessarily be known by some subject(s). According to Sartre, humans know things insofar as we can be conscious of them. Sartre's ontology features a fundamental cleavage between two mutually exclusive entities; the being of consciousness and the being of the phenomenon (that which is known by consciousness). Saliently, consciousness is necessarily "consciousness of something," it cannot be consciousness except in relation to something it knows (Sartre 1978, xxvi). So, for Sartre, knowledge "is a bond of ontological being," namely, the being of consciousness and that of the phenomenon (1978, 177). On this account, the fact of conscious experience already entails knowledge. This paper argues that *how* things are known by conscious subjects reflects how things are in relation to those subjects. Indeed "Sartre offers an account of knowledge in terms of presence" (Churchill and Reynolds 2014, 150). Moreover, whatever object or state of affairs is known by any conscious subject is *believed* by that subject since it is a *true* reflection of how things are *for them*. There is an essential dependency between knowledge and consciousness such that all knowledge is subjectively justified; it just denotes how something is known *by someone*. This paper argues that *any* propositional knowledge claim or belief constitutes knowledge insofar as knowledge is subjectively justified true belief (SJTБ). This account requires a revision to the traditional "fundamentally normative" conception of epistemic justification (Bonjour 1980, 55). Consensus among epistemologists cites that a knowledge claim "is epistemically justified... only if and to the extent that it is aimed at [truth]– which means at a minimum that one accepts only beliefs that there is adequate reason

to think are true” (ibid., 54). On my account, this is not a discriminating criterion but merely describes how subjective belief, justification and truth are already entailed by this conception of knowledge.

Admittedly, this account of knowledge (and truth) as subject-dependent seems to fly in the face of our common-sense intuition regarding the objectivity of knowledge and truth. It should be noted that reference to ‘subjective justification and truth’ (what is justified and true *for* the subject) does not imply that there can be no objectivity. In fact, Sartre’s account of consciousness entails that we can *only* be ‘knowing’ or conscious subjects in relation to determinate objects. When we refer to knowledge as SJTB we are just referring to a particular subject’s knowledge-in-situation. On the SJTB account, the traditional conception of ‘knowledge’ as ‘justified true belief’– which implicitly involves the common-sense notion of ‘objective’ truth– is just intersubjectively valid knowledge. A subject’s knowledge at time *t* is intersubjectively valid if, and only if, what *and* how something is known by one subject corresponds to what and how something can be known by *every* subject at that time. On this account, the ‘justifiers’ for knowledge refer to *how* the conscious subject knows what it does; how some state of affairs is true for them. The following section will expound on this claim and argue that intersubjectively valid knowledge is possible in certain contexts and not possible in others.

3. Intersubjectively Valid Knowledge

Knowledge as SJTB allows for two subjects to have contradictory knowledge of some state of affairs. This section will use an example from physics to demonstrate how something can be known differently by different subjects and nonetheless be *true* for each subject. Consider the doppler effect in physics: “[t]he Doppler effect is an alteration in the observed frequency of a sound due to motion of either the source or the observer” (OpenStax 2022). For instance, “if you ride a train past a stationary warning horn, you will hear the horn’s frequency shift from high to low as you pass by. The actual change in frequency due to relative motion of source and observer is called a Doppler shift”. In figure 1 situation a), the car is stationary and emits sound waves at a frequency

of, say, 150 hertz.¹ Subjects X and Y at equidistant regions from the car both experience and measure (using a frequency meter) the *same* frequency as that emitted by the source. X and Y both *know*—have a subjectively justified true belief— that the car horn has a frequency of 150hz. The respective knowledge that X and Y have regarding the frequency of the car horn happens to be the same in this case. Saliently, *what* is known (the frequency) and *how* it is known by X (it is measured and *known* to be 150 hertz) is true for Y also. Thus, the knowledge of X and Y regarding this state of affairs is intersubjectively valid, that is, it is the same *for* both subjects. In this case, we can see how intersubjective validity builds up to objectivity; this situation implies that some state of affairs can be known in the same way by two *different* subjects. Herein this paper classifies intersubjectively valid knowledge as ‘objective’ knowledge.

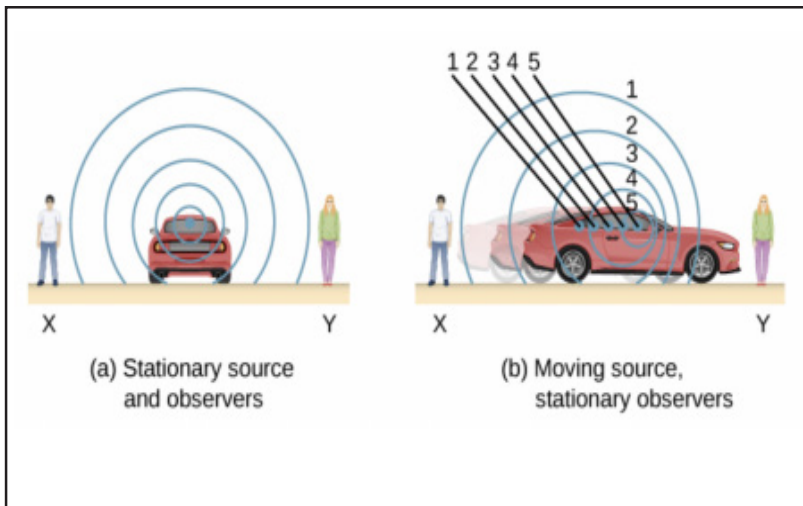


Figure 1.

Consider the situation in Figure 1 b). The car is now moving towards subject Y and away from X. In this case, the sound waves are compressed in the direction in which the car is moving and the waves are farther apart on the other side. In physics, shorter wavelengths correspond to higher frequencies. Saliently, this means that the frequency known and measured by subject Y is different (higher) than that known by X. Y’s knowledge regarding

the frequency of the car horn is not the same as X's. This does not make her knowledge about the situation any less true, indeed it is true *for her*; when she measures the frequency it is higher than 150hz. It only means that it is not intersubjectively valid; *how* she knows the frequency is not the same as how it is known by X (indeed the frequency he measures is lower than 150hz). What is true for X is not true for Y. Accordingly, both X and Y fail to have intersubjectively valid knowledge. By virtue of factors external to each subject (the fact that the source is moving), intersubjectively valid knowledge regarding the frequency of the horn is not possible in this situation.

In case a), the subjects' knowledge *can* be intersubjectively validated, thus, 'objective' knowledge is possible. However, objective knowledge is not possible in case b). Certainly, the subjects may have some knowledge regarding wave dynamics and may be intuitively aware that the frequency they experience differs from the frequency emitted by the source. However, they can never *know* that frequency to be 150hz (the source frequency) *from their perspective*. All they can know is how that frequency is for them. In retrospect, they may be able to calculate the source frequency by using the doppler formula or checking the horn's frequency. However, this does not make how they knew the frequency in the past any less true, nor does it entail that the source frequency is the 'true' frequency since the frequency varies depending on where one is when it is measured. This just means that any knowledge (SJT) regarding the frequency in case b) fails to have intersubjective validity.

We established that the possibility of objective knowledge is context-dependent. Crucially, it depends on whether intersubjective justification for what is known subjectively is possible. That is, whether some state of affairs *can* be known in the same way by any and all subjects. We are now in a position to formalise the criterion for propositional knowledge (in the form of S knows that p) to qualify as objective:

S's knowledge that p is objective if and only if p is true *for everyone* at that time (irrespective of whether everyone knows that p) and the set of S's justifiers for p

(how S knows that p) is at least partially coextensive with the set of intersubjective justifiers for p (how *everyone* can know that p).

Let us reconsider the Gettier case mentioned in section 1. In this case, p denotes the knowledge that ‘someone in S’s office owns a Ford’. p is known by S insofar as it is a SJTB for S. p is justified for S because of S’s evidence regarding Nogot. In this case, p happens to be true for everyone –someone in S’s office does own a Ford– however, that person is Haveit and not Nogot. Thus, *how* p is true for S is not how p is true for *everyone*. The intersubjective justification for p concerns Haveit and not Nogot. Thus, S’s knowledge that p does not coincide with the intersubjective knowledge that p. Therefore, S’s knowledge does not qualify as objective since it is not intersubjectively valid. Figure 2 uses Venn diagrams to depict this.

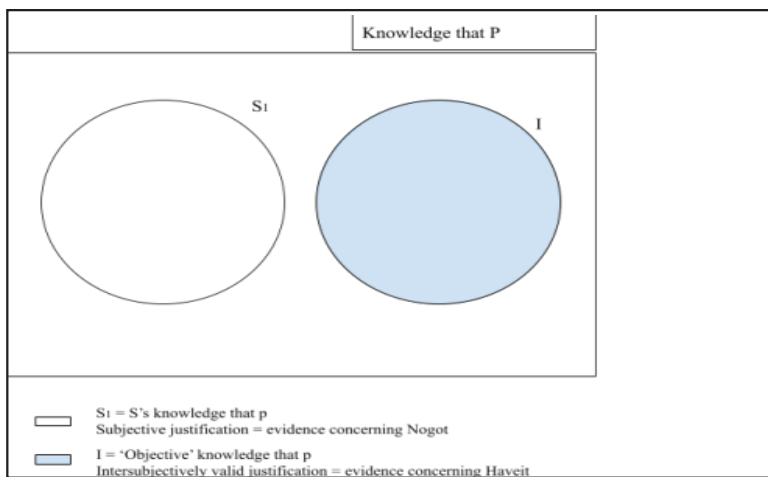


Figure 2.

Now consider subject F who also claims to know that p. F only has evidence concerning Haveit. Thus, F’s subjective justification– how p is *true for her*– is identical to the intersubjective justification for p, how p is true *for everyone*. Now consider subject G’s knowledge that p; G has evidence concerning *both* Nogot and Haveit. While G’s justification includes a subjective justifier that is *not*

intersubjectively valid, it also includes one that is. On this account both F and G's knowledge may be classified as objective. This is illustrated in figure 3.

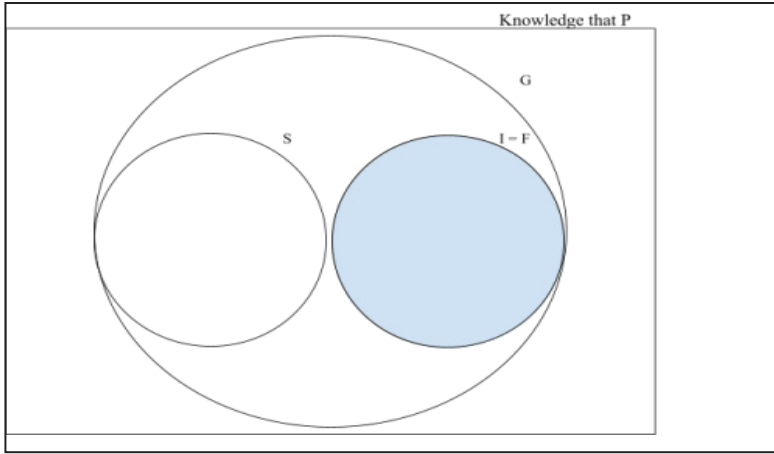


Figure 3.

This theory of knowledge does not attribute epistemic 'virtue' to knowledge claims or cognitive agents. Rather, it provides a framework for comparing and classifying knowledge. It allows us to make comparisons between the knowledge of individual subjects by examining the extent to which the sets of subjective and intersubjective justifiers are coextensive. One could use this framework to decompose and compare individual subject's knowledge claims and evaluate the 'success' or 'epistemic virtue' of cognitive agents by considering the frequency and extent to which their knowledge is intersubjectively valid (i.e., the degree of overlap between S/F/G and I). However, such attributions presuppose that knowledge is a normative concept. All this framework tells us is that some state of affairs may be justified and true for one agent and yet fail to be intersubjectively valid. Virtue-theoretic evaluations may be pragmatic but solely under the assumption that 'objective truth' is some epistemic good and that knowledge claims and/or cognitive agents can be normatively evaluated. In any case, virtue theories of knowledge are not necessary to provide an account of knowledge that is robust to Gettier counterexamples.

Conclusion

This essay has conducted a primitive exposition of a non-standard account of knowledge as subjectively justified true belief. The SJTB account hinges on the premise that all knowledge claims are inherently justified for the cognitive agent, which has the implication of collapsing the internalist/externalist debate in relation to theories of justification and knowledge. On this account, the 'objective knowledge' that the traditional JTB definition attempts to account for is identified as intersubjectively valid knowledge. This essay has demonstrated how intersubjective validity builds up to 'objectivity' as it is colloquially used and understood. Moreover, it was established that Gettier cases do not pose a problem for this theory; they merely depict cases in which some subject's knowledge is not intersubjectively valid. As such, this paper concludes that the SJTB account of knowledge has a higher degree of explanatory power than the JTB account in explaining i) the individual subject's experience of knowledge and ii) the common sense phenomenon of 'objective' knowledge. Finally, the SJTB account is virtue-agnostic and may, with further research and development, provide a more accurate and equitable framework for analyzing and evaluating the epistemic status or contributions of individual cognitive agents.

Endnotes

1. Figure 1 is sourced from OpenStax (2022)

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