

# EPISTEME

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An International Journal  
of Undergraduate Philosophy

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**ep•i•ste•me** \ep' i ste' mé\ n. [Gk. *epistém(é)*]:  
knowledge; *specif.*, intellectually certain knowledge



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Please see the Call for Papers at the back of the journal for information on submitting to our next volume.



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# A Defense of Emotivism and its Utility in Normative Discourse

**Evan Barker**

University of South Carolina

Metaethical theories can be divided into two overarching categories: cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories. Cognitivism is the belief that our moral statements contain truth value, meaning they can be true or false. On the contrary, non-cognitivism argues that these statements contain no truth-value, and thus the statement “X is good” cannot be true or false. Emotivism, a non-cognitivist moral theory, is the belief that our moral judgments are not statements regarding what exists in the world, but expressions of our own feelings and emotions. Given an emotivist perspective, the judgment “X is good” would amount to “Hooray X,” or “Yay X,” which is an expression that cannot be true or false. Emotivism rose to popularity in the mid-20th century, with contributions from philosophers such as A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on C. L. Stevenson’s iteration of emotivism in his 1937 publication “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” and his book *Ethics and Language* that was later published in 1944. However, emotivism comes under criticism from objectivist critics, who, unlike non-cognitivists, believe that moral judgments do contain truth value and additionally describe some universal property of an object. Objectivists such as Brand Blanshard take issue with emotivism due to its seeming inability to account for objective moral properties that objects of moral judgments might hold.

In this paper, I will defend emotivism by responding to two objections: first, that emotivism does not adequately account for objective moral properties, and second, that when emotivism is adopted, it would lead to chaos in moral discourse. First, I will provide an account of C. L. Stevenson’s formulation of emotivism, including the dual nature of moral judgments and the emotive nature of the term “good”. Using this perspective on moral

judgments, I will respond to Blanshard's objection by showing that emotivism does not encounter any problems by ignoring the objective moral properties an object may or may not have. I will prove this by applying emotivism to Blanshard's rabbit scenario in two cases: first, that objective moral properties do not exist (to account for an emotivist perspective), and secondly that they do (objectivism). This will provide a general defense of emotivism when applied to situational dilemmas. Next, I will respond to Blanshard's second objection that emotivism would lead to chaos if adopted by referencing the influential nature of moral judgments. I will detail how, through an analogy that closely mirrors Blanshard's objection, emotivism can not only assist in solving normative problems, but also provide more utility than an objectivist perspective on morality by accounting for the conflicting attitudes of moral agents. Finally, I will go on to prove that emotivism is more effective than objectivism in solving problems in moral discourse and overcomes many traditional roadblocks that we encounter when applying objectivist ethical theories to normative scenarios.

In Stevenson's publication "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," he focuses on redefining our moral judgments as expressions of our interests instead of conjuring a universal formula for "goodness" (Stevenson 1937, 16-17). He does this by differentiating the descriptive meanings of our judgments, which account for our empirical observations about what exists, with their dynamic meanings, which are more suited to describe our emotions and feelings. He goes on to state that words also have emotive meanings, which are tendencies to "produce *affective* responses in people. It is the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word" (Stevenson 1937, 23). Emotive meanings are useful in helping us convey the dynamic meanings of our moral judgments, like our attitudes, instead of solely a descriptive meaning. Thus, the statement "X is good" does not solely serve the purpose of defining the speaker's own interest (descriptively), but carries the purpose of influencing others or making an ethical suggestion (dynamically). It is important to note that Stevenson himself believes the term "good" to be indefinable, as no other word can provide an adequate substitute for its emotive meaning. While there are other

words that seem to convey a similar meaning, such as “desirable,” “beneficial,” and “pleasurable,” Stevenson argues that words like these merely redirect one’s attitudes regarding what is “good” and “distort its emotive meaning” – therefore, not only can we not define good, but we cannot replace it with another word (Stevenson 1944, 82). Therefore, by accepting this view of moral judgments, we are rejecting the idea that moral facts can be known entirely empirically and thus embracing non-cognitivism, since, by Stevenson’s definition, “X is good” cannot be true or false. While our moral judgments can be made empirically based on our observations (or beliefs), they do not have any impact on whether or not the entity in question is actually morally good. While a main tenet of emotivism is that moral judgments are not truth-apt, later I will defend this view of moral judgments from both a non-cognitivist and an objectivist perspective to show how an emotivist perspective would not affect any potential objective moral properties.

Stevenson also makes several noteworthy statements regarding the nature of ethical disagreements later on in his book *Ethics and Language*. He makes a distinction between two kinds of disagreements: those rooted in belief and those rooted in attitude. He defines disagreements in belief as debates over “how things are to be described or explained,” and disagreements in attitude as conflicting states of approval with an emphasis on a reciprocal desire to influence the other (Stevenson 1944, 3-4). Stevenson points out that traditional objectivist theories limit moral disagreements to scientific or empirical disagreements, or disagreements in belief, which “will lead to only a half-picture, at best, of the situations in which the ethical terms are actually used” by ignoring the influential attitudes behind our moral judgments (Stevenson 1944, 20). Not only are both of these kinds of disagreements vital when considering ethical judgments, they can also reciprocally influence each other. The attitudes we are predisposed to can affect what information we actively seek, limiting our beliefs, which, in turn, influences our attitudes regarding the things we observe. For example, someone who believes that euthanasia is morally wrong in all cases will tend to seek out information that supports their negative perception of euthanasia, reinforcing their pre-existing

attitude.

Many philosophers, such as Brand Blanshard, have criticized emotivism for its non-cognitive nature. In Blanshard's publication "The New Subjectivism in Ethics," he poses many objections, however, for the sake of this paper we will focus on two. Firstly, he argues through an analogy of a rabbit caught in a trap that the ethical judgments created as a result of emotivism do not accurately account for moral properties of an entity. However, this is not the only objection Blanshard raises. He also finds difficulty with the application of emotivism to political debate, arguing that "its [emotivism] general acceptance would, so far as one can see, be an international disaster," as it would allegedly make it impossible to reach a consensus between right and wrong in situations such as international courts (Blanshard 1949, 510-511).

In order to make his first argument that emotivism is not equipped to describe an object's moral characteristics, Blanshard introduces the rabbit analogy. In this scenario, a rabbit has been caught in a trap and "struggled for days to escape and that in a frenzy of hunger, pain, and fear, it has all but eaten off its own leg" (Blanshard 1949, 505), ultimately dying. When stumbled upon by a bystander, the bystander immediately expresses that the death of the rabbit is morally bad. Blanshard asserts that, for an emotivist, "nothing good or bad happened in the case until I came on the scene" (Blanshard 1949, 506), and that the pain of the rabbit had no moral significance until observed by someone. Blanshard further argues that, if the rabbit actually did not fall into the trap and he merely believed it did, upon receiving news that the rabbit did not in fact die, there would be no reason for the speaker to feel any sense of relief, since "in that suffering itself there was nothing bad at all, and hence in its non-occurrence there would be nothing to be relieved about" (Blanshard 1949, 506), and everything that was bad in the first case is still present here. It is important to note that Blanshard's argument comes from a strictly objectivist viewpoint; the judgment "X is good" is asserting a character of the subject X, as he states (Blanshard 1949, 505). However, I intend to defend emotivism regardless of whether or not these objective

moral properties do exist in order to show that, under any condition, an emotivist approach to this scenario is viable.

First, we shall approach the rabbit scenario from an emotivist perspective. In Stevenson's case, he asserts that the definition of something's "goodness" must not be entirely verifiable through the scientific method (Stevenson 1937, 16). Therefore, for the emotivist, there are no moral characteristics that entities hold that constitute goodness or badness that we can physically observe. Thus, in the case that events do not have objective moral properties, the observation of the dead rabbit in the trap would not change the intrinsic fact that the event occurred, which is separate from any assignment of moral weight. And, in the case that the event did not occur, the mistaken expression of one's feelings related to the death of the rabbit would not have any effect on whether or not the death did occur. Furthermore, any feelings of relief felt by the bystander are not derived from any intrinsic moral goodness or badness assigned to the death of the rabbit, but rather their own attitudes toward the event, therefore, one's relief is not entirely derived from the moral properties of the event (regardless of whether they exist) in this scenario. This is a result of the simple differentiation between our judgments regarding the moral nature of an event and whether it actually occurred. For the emotivist, regardless of whether the rabbit was observed in the trap, its death still occurred, and any ethical judgments of the "badness" of the death would be made as an expression of the speaker's interests about the moral nature of the event. Thus, since there are no objective moral properties for the agent's statement to conflict with, the rabbit scenario does not pose a problem for the emotivist.

For the objectivist, this case becomes slightly complicated, as there are multiple ways to view objective moral truth: attitude-independence and standpoint-invariance, as defined by philosopher Jeroen Hopster. He defines attitude-independent moral objectivity as the stance that there are objective facts about what is right or wrong, regardless of an agent's attitude toward them (Hopster 2017, 764). On the other hand, standpoint-invariance moral objectivity states that a moral judgment X does

have an objective moral value, but rather one that will still follow from a variety of standpoints. Hopster states that “however these standpoints may differ, the truth of X will still follow from it” (Hopster 2017, 773), or that, regardless of an agent’s moral judgment regarding some X, the moral properties of X will always follow, even if the agent is incorrect about the nature of X, as we will see. In addition, standpoint invariance yields the idea that our moral statements are persuasive in nature, similar to what we find in Stevenson’s emotivism (Hopster 2017). Hopster does this by differentiating moral judgments, which convey an “incentive to influence people’s attitudes” and judgments of “taste, convention, or aesthetics” (Hopster 2017, 773), which he calls evaluative judgments. For this reason, an agent’s moral judgment can be incorrect on the basis that there is an error in their evaluation, or evaluative judgment, regarding a particular entity X, and can be influenced by another agent’s moral judgment in order to clarify this evaluative error. Furthermore, although the agent’s moral standpoint regarding X is incorrect in this situation, given new information we would assume that the true moral value of X would follow from their standpoint. This differs from attitude-independent objectivism in several ways, but most notably by straying away from the conception that moral values are entirely independent of ethical judgments and by emphasizing their influential nature.

For a realist (attitude-independent) objectivist, the line of reasoning should follow similarly as a non-cognitivist. While objectivists would argue that the struggle of the rabbit would be intrinsically bad, the attitudes that any witnesses conveyed through a moral judgment would not alter this status. Therefore, even though the rabbit’s death carries objective moral properties in this case, an expression of a moral judgment from a bystander would not alter or diminish these properties. Furthermore, this position also supports the previous claim that the expression of negative emotion from any bystander would not change the intrinsic fact that the event of the rabbit’s death did occur, and thus, from an objectivist’s perspective, would not change the event’s moral value. In the case that the rabbit was not trapped, and the bystander is mistaken, not only would they feel relief from their own

internal preferences for the rabbit to avoid harm, but they would also feel relief as the “badness” of the event was avoided, by Blanshard’s own argument, therefore, for the realist objectivist, this case does not create a conflict with the objective badness of the rabbit’s death.

For the standpoint-invariant moral objectivist, the goodness or badness of the rabbit’s harm would hold regardless of the witness’s evaluative standpoint of the event, and therefore the expression of the agent upon finding the rabbit would not change the event’s intrinsic moral value. For the scenario in which the agent simply believed that the rabbit was trapped when in reality it was not, this constitutes an error in their evaluative standpoint resulting from a lack of information. As Hopster states, the moral objectivity of an entity can follow from one’s evaluative standpoint without resulting from what one *thinks* follows from their evaluative standpoint (Hopster 2017, 772). Therefore, the badness that they perceive would not follow from their standpoint were they given the information that the rabbit was not in fact dead. However, as argued previously, the feeling of regret from the agent is not necessarily rooted in the moral value of the rabbit’s death, but rather their own feelings toward it, therefore, it would still be possible for a standpoint objectivist to feel regret in this case. Thus, regardless of if the critic adopts a non-cognitivist, realist objectivist, or anti-realist objectivist standpoint, Blanshard’s objection that the lack of perception of an event would diminish its moral “badness” (if the speaker wishes to adopt that it exists) given an emotivist perspective on moral judgments is false. From this, we obtain a general defense of emotivism as an ethical theory when applied situationally, indicating that it does not create any conflicts with moral properties of objects.

As mentioned previously, critics such as Blanshard may continue to argue that emotivism is not an acceptable ethical theory as it is not equipped to deal with moral disagreements on a wider scale, such as international relations. Blanshard states that the adoption of emotivism around the world would lead to an “international disaster” and the inability to clearly define right and wrong explicitly as a means of regulating conduct between



countries (Blanshard 1949, 510). Blanshard references the German invasion of Poland as an example, citing how it was widely supported by German civilians at the time yet was an implicitly wrong action. This serves to critique the expressive and seemingly unsatisfying nature of emotivism when viewed at a surface level as well as its description of the non-cognitive nature of morality. I will defend emotivism against this objection, providing an explanation for how emotivism can be used to solve normative problems we may face in modern moral discourse.

In order to account for this, Stevenson himself specifically references the ability of emotivism to be used to solve moral disagreements. He describes ethical judgments as “social instruments... used in a cooperative enterprise in which we are mutually adjusting ourselves to the influence of others” (Stevenson 1937, 29), and while these may lead to the formation of individual ethical communities (as Blanshard expresses), Stevenson maintains the idea that ethical judgments can only be expressed through means of persuasion. As Stevenson asserts, we are all consistently making impressions on others through our exchange of moral judgments. These interactions, although small, ultimately help to spread a variety of perspectives and attitudes that are important for working toward a solution when encountering moral disagreements. We exist, especially modernly, in a highly communicative society that is constantly exchanging ideas and beliefs. Blanshard’s worldview indicates a belief that an ethical expression of attitude would have no influence on those with opposing standpoints and that disagreements cannot be made without reference to an (arguably unknowable) universal moral truth. Instead, using his example, to call the German invasion of Poland morally wrong would not be “meaningless” under Stevenson’s emotivism, but rather promote discussion and the exchange of ideas, as exists in any ethical debate, political or non-political, and ultimately assist in leading to a resolution. I will show that viewing moral discourse from this angle offers far more assistance when attempting to solve real-world ethical disagreements than a cognitivist, objectivist approach would.

Given the dual nature of moral judgments that Stevenson



gives with his formulation of emotivism, this non-cognitivist account for morality is more useful when dealing with ethical disagreements than objectivist views. In order to reach this conclusion, first, one must consider that an emotivist approach to normative ethical dilemmas allows for a far wider range of insights and opinions. When engaging in disagreements, the realist objectivist has no motivation to change their perspective or listen to any possible counter argument since their views *will* withstand scrutiny from a large set of perspectives and (presumably) align with what they believe to be an objective and undeniable moral truth. Although antirealist objectivists attempt to address this problem, by assuming that every agent would come to the correct conclusion regarding the moral qualities of an entity, we run into a similar self-validated objective perspective, creating a similar problem. For example, from a standpoint-invariance objectivist's viewpoint, if they are confident that the moral truth of some object X follows from their evaluative standpoint, and they receive no new information to update this standpoint, Therefore, objectivist theories are not receptive to disagreements in attitude and do not acknowledge the effect that they have on moral interchanges as they believe ethical judgments to be simply evaluative and they are confident that their beliefs align with certain objective moral properties. However, when approaching them from an emotivist standpoint, moral progress becomes far more plausible because the emotivist's dual-natured moral judgments do not conform to objective moral qualities, promoting change and reform from moral discourse.

Given the foundation we have laid regarding the benefits of emotivism, I will now show how emotivism can be applied in a concrete normative setting in order to solve moral problems where objectivism fails. Let us suppose that Country X firmly believes that an action done by Country Y (for example, harvesting resources on land that is not theirs) is morally wrong. On the contrary, Country Y is strict in their judgment that their action was morally justified, creating a moral disagreement between the two parties. By making this ethical judgment, for the objectivist, Country X is making a statement that correlates to some moral

property of Country Y's action. Assuming that Country X and Country Y both have concurrent beliefs regarding the nature of Country Y's action, with no regard to possible disagreements in attitude, neither country has any motivation to compromise or even entertain a possible counterargument. Instead, since it follows from each countries' own perspective that there is a logical correlation with an objective moral truth, each conflicting claim is substantiated, creating an unsolvable issue. While a compromise is possible, from this point, there is no way that each party can resolve their disagreements about the moral qualities of Country Y's action. This analogy is used to represent an ethical disagreement between two countries (as to respond to Blanshard's objection) as well as an example of a normative dilemma in order to illustrate the benefits of emotivism when dealing with modern moral discourse.

It is obvious from this example that, in the case of an ethical debate through the lens of realist objectivism, there are very few (if any) available resources to remediate the conflict. However, if we attempt to see the same scenario through the lens of non-cognitivism, we see that neither party feels the need to substantiate their argument with reference to an unknowable objective moral truth but can rather use their collective interest in influencing one another to reach a resolution. While Blanshard disagrees, arguing that the lack of objectively known moral values can give each country the ability to do what they want without repercussion, it is supported by this scenario that emotivism provides far more opportunities to reach an agreed-upon solution between both parties. When focus is placed on remediation and the mutual influence of each party's ethical judgments are acknowledged, far more can be done to solve the debate than simple self-reinforcing judgments. As we have shown, this emphasis on remediation and the exchange of attitudes is extremely vital to modern moral discourse, and yet it is only present when moral judgments are viewed as having a disagreement in attitude. Thus, emotivism is not only useful in reaching a functional conclusion in moral discourse, but also overcomes roadblocks to moral progress that are present when we view moral judgments through an objectivist lens.

Throughout this paper, I have clarified the false belief by objectivist philosophers such as Blanshard that emotivism is responsible for validating what most would consider to be clearly morally wrong actions (such as the German invasion of Poland), and that the perception or judgment of an event under a non-cognitive theory such as emotivism does not add or subtract moral value from an event, but rather serves as a formulation of the speaker's beliefs and attitudes toward the event. Not only was this accomplished, but a defense of the use of emotivism in terms of modern ethical debate was proposed, contrary to objections that it would allow agents to disregard the opinions of other parties. With the intention of improving society as a whole, when applied on a normative level, emotivism would provide a number of benefits by not only allowing for a mutual influence of ethical judgments from opposing viewpoints of a debate, but also acknowledging the roles our attitudes play in moral disagreements. In the scope of moral discourse, this leads to many debates that simply result in the amplification of one's own voice due to the knowledge (or, rather, the belief) that they are correct and their views align with an objective, knowable aspect of morality. While objective moral truths may or may not exist, regardless of their status, emotivism aims to deconstruct the empirical method of moral debate and assists in creating tangible social progress in a way that objective ethics cannot.

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# Kantian Ethics, CTE, and the Implications of American Football

**Emily Bach**

Georgetown University

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I aim to examine the ethical implications of pursuing American tackle football. I will approach the discussion from a Kantian lens and accept the humanity formulation of the categorical imperative. I will elaborate on the implications of this version of the categorical imperative and how it gives rise to the imperfect duty of self-improvement. After setting up this ethical framework, I endeavor to answer the question of whether pursuing American tackle football at the college level can be an appropriate way to fulfill this duty. I ultimately argue that, although it can be a way to cultivate one's talents, pursuing college football is a morally impermissible activity. The risk of acquiring chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) from football is too high for the end of playing college football to be one that aligns with Kant's vision of the imperfect duty to self.

The first section of this paper provides a summary of Immanuel Kant's humanity formulation of the categorical imperative and the imperfect duty to self that follows from this principle. The second section details an example of a high school football athlete who is deciding whether to pursue college football and discusses whether this pursuit will fulfill his Kantian duty of self-perfection. In the third section, I explain how playing college football elevates the risk of contracting CTE and why this added risk makes it morally impermissible to play college football. In the fourth and fifth sections, I entertain two potential objections, namely "The Tom Brady Objection" and "The Scholarship Objection," and respond to them. Finally,

I conclude with a restatement of my argument and a discussion of its real-world implications.

### **I) Kant's Humanity Formulation and the Imperfect Duty of Self-Improvement**

Kant's ethical system is largely grounded in his categorical imperative, a principle that guides the rational person's actions so that they align with what is objectively morally right. Kant asserts that any person should be able to arrive at this principle through making proper use of their rationality. He provides different formulations of the categorical imperative and believes these formulations to be equivalent. I will focus on the humanity formulation in particular, which requires us to "[a]ct in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, [1] always at the same time as an end, [2] never merely as a means." <sup>1</sup> The key assumption behind this doctrine is that, because of their rational capacities, all humans have value. This value, which I will also call dignity, is both incommensurable and absolute. Since it is incommensurable, human value cannot be traded, measured, or compared in the way that we compare the value of objects. Since it is absolute, or unconditional, it does not depend on the possession of certain traits or goods, or on the interests of some other agent. To treat ourselves and others with respect to our dignity requires that we abide by both parts of the humanity formulation.

I will first discuss the second part, which tells us to never treat a person as a *mere* means. To treat a person as a means would be to use them to achieve one's own goal. To treat them as a mere means is to use them in such a way that their dignity is compromised. Thus, this part of the categorical imperative requires us to avoid acting in ways that disrespect or endanger a rational agent's ability to reason (i.e., an agent's capacity to set appropriate values or principles and consider how those values interact with contextual information to form beliefs and make decisions). For instance, say you are a high schooler who has eaten the last nine of your mother's homemade chocolate chip cookies in one sitting and is now embarrassed. Later on, to your horror, your mother asks you whether you know what happened to the cookies. If you lie to her and say you have no idea where

they went, you are treating your mother as a mere means. (You are also treating yourself as a mere means, but I need not elaborate on that aspect of the wrongful action for the sake of this example.) By presenting your mother with incorrect information as truth, you are preventing her from properly reasoning and thus using her as simply an object to help you pursue your goals of not getting in trouble and not being regarded as gluttonous. Abiding by this part of the categorical imperative here and in all other examples involves *not* doing something in order to act appropriately in a moral sense. Not treating humans as mere means suggests certain actions (including lying) are forbidden and should be avoided. We have negative duties, or perfect duties, to *not* perform such actions.

In contrast, the first part of the categorical imperative mandates that we treat humanity always as an end. In Kant's philosophy, an agent's 'end' refers to what the agent hopes to achieve and is roughly synonymous with the agent's intended goal. Treating humanity as an end in itself requires that we treat ourselves and other people as setters of ends, as agents who use reason to set goals and decide how to act. To effectively do so, we must act in ways that promote human dignity. In other words, we must take on goals that follow from the rational choices of ourselves and others or help further rational decision-making more generally. Since this part of the categorical imperative concerns performing morally appropriate actions as opposed to not performing morally inappropriate actions, it is linked to our positive duties, or imperfect duties. Although these duties are obligatory, they are imperfect in the sense that we have options for how to fulfill them. Countless ends could promote the dignity of ourselves and others, so we have some leeway in the ends we select.

Still, Kant argues that there are two general ends which we all must adopt—one is our imperfect duty to self, and one is our imperfect duty to others. Our imperfect duty to self requires us to cultivate our own perfection, whereas our imperfect duty to others requires us to adopt others' ends as our own. Regardless of whether I am working toward another person's goal or my own, I would theoretically perform some set of actions to bring about



that goal.<sup>1</sup> Much of this paper focuses on the imperfect duty to self in particular—the duty to set my own goals and perform actions that help bring about those goals. I will refer to it as the duty of self-improvement, self-development, or self-perfection.

Self-development, when done properly, benefits both the self-developing agent and the other members of the agent's community. The intuitive desire that many people have to find and pursue their "purpose" closely resembles what is meant by self-perfection. To fulfill the duty in Kant's ideal way, one must rationally reflect on what goals to set for one's life and act in ways that help to fulfill those goals.

For instance, if becoming a calculus teacher seems like the most rational life goal of my options, I should apply to graduate programs in education to cultivate my teaching skills, review the relevant mathematical concepts to cultivate my calculus skills, and similarly cultivate all other relevant talents. However, the duty is not as simple as setting goals and cultivating skills to achieve them. The rational reflection process should lead one to target goals that are realistic and worthwhile. Thus, when deciding which ends to adopt to fulfill the duty of self-perfection, the individual should rule out pursuits which (1) do not follow from one's natural abilities, (2) are foolish, (3) are impossible, (4) are undesirable, or (5) may violate some perfect duty.

The first condition, that goals should align with one's natural abilities, does not necessitate that one be a prodigy from the outset. Rather, one must be capable of becoming adequate enough for the endeavor to be a worthwhile

<sup>1</sup> It is a common misconception that Kant cares only about the state of our will, about the intentions of our actions and not the consequences. However, to properly conceptualize our imperfect duties, we must care about the consequences of our actions. When fulfilling an imperfect duty, I am pursuing some end and trying to bring about a particular outcome. To properly pursue this end, I must consider whether my actions would actually help bring about that outcome. If they are not succeeding in promoting the end or are inhibiting the end in some way, then I must seek out alternative actions. Moreover, if I have yet to perform some action to promote an end but anticipate that action failing to promote the end or inhibiting the end in some way, then that action would not help me fulfill my imperfect duty. I would not perform that action in the first place because of its unhelpful consequences, so consequences are relevant to the Kantian.

goal, one that is not foolish. Moreover, just because one possesses some talent that may be beneficial does not mean one *must* cultivate that talent. Every person has a variety of capacities they *could* develop, but since self-perfection is an imperfect duty, we have choice in the way we fulfill the duty. When selecting a goal to pursue, one must keep in mind the second condition, that the goal should not be foolish. To meet this condition, firstly, one's end of choice must be worthwhile in the sense that, when pursued properly, it would somehow benefit both the individual and the community. Secondly, to not be foolish the goal must promote rationality in some way. It must position us in a way that allows us to "identify problems, figure out effective solutions to them, and be creative about new ways to move forward."<sup>2</sup> The particular problems, solutions, and creative approaches depend on the agent and their choices. Nevertheless, for any agent to fulfill their duty of self-perfection, they must limit their end of choice and the actions required to pursue that end to non-foolish ones.

To meet the third condition, that the goal not be impossible, one must choose goals that make sense given not only one's natural abilities, but also one's circumstances. If a particular context would make all attempts to reach one's aim unsuccessful, one should reason that selecting some other aim(s) is necessary. When the chances of achieving an aim are slim, the agent must use their rational capacity to determine whether the aim is feasible enough in light of their abilities and the external factors involved.

The fourth requirement is that the goal not be undesirable, specifically for the agent. The individual must decide the type of life they deem desirable, and whether one has the ability to cultivate the skills to live that life. However, I am not implying that every step toward achieving the goal must be enjoyable in some sense. Say Lucy is taking pre-med classes because she considers doctorhood a desirable life. Lucy can detest her required organic chemistry class and find studying for her organic chemistry final an unenjoyable endeavor. Nevertheless, if she finds the ultimate aim a desirable one, she is not violating the fourth requirement by setting an end to work as a doctor.

The fifth requirement, that whatever end one adopts to work toward self-improvement would not require violating any negative duties, is an important one. This requirement is related to what distinguishes perfect and imperfect duties. Positive duties are imperfect in that we have choice in what acts they entail, and negative duties are perfect in that they forbid specific acts. Although we are morally obligated to fulfill both sets of duties, perfect duties must always take precedence over imperfect duties. If I decide end X promotes humanity as an end in itself, but to achieve end X I must treat some human as a mere means, then I cannot perform whatever course of action would lead to end X. I am free to choose some other end to pursue instead to promote human dignity, so long as that end does not compromise anyone's rational capacity. Thus, when figuring out how to self-develop, I must rule out goals that Kantians would deem immoral as well as goals that consist of seemingly moral ends but require morally inappropriate steps toward those ends.

These requirements considered, we must keep in mind that Kant is not telling us to pick one path, ignore all other potential paths, and not look back. As Kantian scholar Robert N. Johnson notes, "[t]he obligation of self-development should not be thought of as binding only the young; it is an on-going project, always revisable in light of current circumstances."<sup>3</sup> Thus, at any point in time, one can rationally reflect and see whether one's goals still make sense in light of new circumstances or newly identified talents. If not, one is free to shift one's priorities and adopt new goals. In addition, we must see the value in not specializing too much but in developing skills in a more general manner. We must develop capacities in a way that allows for a modification of our pursuits when such modification is deemed rational. Thus, the cultivation of our talents should leave open a realm of possible paths for fulfilling the duty of self-improvement. Our goals must allow for well-roundedness in the sense that we continue to have different options for our potential purposes.

In addition, they must contribute to our well-roundedness in the sense that the goals in themselves involve the cultivation of multiple human capacities. Self-development consists in both moral development and

natural development. Moral development involves “cultivating four moral ‘endowments’ of moral feeling, self-respect, conscience and love of humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Natural development involves cultivating the natural capacities of “mind (including capacities used in the pursuit of mathematics, logic, science, and philosophy), spirit (including memory, imagination, learning and taste), and body (including athletic abilities[...]).”<sup>5</sup> Most talents or abilities involve exercising capacities from multiple of these categories, and we must cultivate as many of these capacities as possible yet prioritize the cultivation of rationality-related capacities. Human dignity is promoted by thinking rationally about what ends to pursue, but it is promoted even more when those ends themselves involve thinking rationally. Furthermore, cultivating as many human capacities as possible is linked to the requirement for goals to not be foolish, for them to be worthwhile and benefit society. By selecting goals that develop a range of human capacities, one effectively does one’s part for “the task of humanity as a whole”–the task of achieving “*complete* perfection of *all* individual human capacities.”<sup>6</sup>

## **II) Case of the High School Athlete Pursuing College Football**

Taking this Kantian ethical framework into account, we can consider a case where a high school athlete, Max, is deciding whether to play college football. Max is a running back known for his exceptional skills on the field. He has loved football since he started at age three. His nights are spent practicing his football skills, working to get faster and stronger, and studying game tapes to strategize with his team. Now, countless Division I college teams are trying to recruit him, and he must consider whether the end of playing college football is one he can pursue to fulfill his duty of self-development.

Upon rational reflection, Max should realize that football does follow from his natural abilities. Since he has demonstrated his talent on the playing field already, clearly he can continue to develop his skills to become a college-level player and get even better at the sport in college. He can continue to perform football drills, do more weight training and sprinting, and partake in more strategizing and game tape watching. Given this potential

and the fact that he is being recruited by multiple schools, clearly the goal of cultivating his football skills at the collegiate level is not out of reach for Max. His end is thus possible and follows from his natural capacities. His end need not be ruled out by the fourth condition, as Max thoroughly enjoys football. Moreover, his end is not a foolish one because his football pursuits benefit both himself and the community. The community is benefited in part through the entertainment value that comes from football. Max would contribute to the pleasure that comes with following college football. This pleasure is at least partially linked to the rational capacities of fans since fans can analyze statistics and games and use their reasoning skills to draw conclusions about the sport. He would be benefiting the smaller community of his college team by hopefully helping them have a successful season and improve at the sport by playing alongside Max. It would benefit Max by allowing him to cultivate his capacity of mind through strategizing, his capacity of spirit through the imaginative aspect of hoping for successful games and seasons, and his capacity of body through the cultivation of strength, speed, and hand-eye coordination. Pursuing college football would help Max possess a Kantian well-roundedness, as he would be cultivating a variety of natural capacities and also leave his options for future paths open by receiving a college education. By perfecting his football-related skills, Max would contribute to the larger task of humanity to perfect as many capacities as possible.

Since Max's case does not satisfy any of the first four conditions that would render his pursuit of college football an unfit end for the duty of self-improvement, we must consider whether it satisfies the fifth. In other words, it raises the question of whether playing college football might violate some perfect duty. In the section below, I will argue that playing college football puts one at significantly higher risk of contracting CTE. Accepting this risk would be a violation of certain perfect duties and treat humanity as a mere means.

### **III) Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy and Perfect Duties**

Before I elaborate on its Kantian import, I will

provide some relevant background on CTE. CTE is a neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated concussive and subconcussive head trauma, i.e. impacts to the head. A concussive head trauma, or concussion, occurs when the brain is shaken within the skull to a point of altered “alertness of the injured person”; this altered alertness looks like slight dazedness on the mild side and unconsciousness on the severe side.<sup>7</sup> A subconcussive head trauma, on the other hand, is a head trauma that does not lead to any of the concussive symptoms and does not involve a change in alertness.<sup>8</sup> Since many athletes who never experienced concussions have contracted CTE, subconcussive hits are seen as just as serious a causal factor as concussive ones.<sup>9</sup> When a person receives many blows to the head over time, regardless of whether the blows are concussive, subconcussive, or both, such blows may bring about “lasting structural changes in the brain” that result in CTE.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, when a head trauma involving either of these hits occurs, tau proteins are “dislodged from brain fibers” and accumulate over time.<sup>11</sup> The tau accumulation spreads from the initial deposit to surround full regions of the brain and consequently prevents communication between neurons (brain cells).<sup>12</sup> As the tau accumulations grow, the symptoms of CTE get worse in severity. They emerge 8-10 years after the first repeated head blows and become gradually more intense.<sup>13</sup>

Assuming one develops CTE, one’s rational faculties are inevitably impaired by the CTE symptoms. Although CTE can be diagnosed only by autopsy, the experiences of those with confirmed cases of CTE have been analyzed postmortem to help scientists identify symptoms of the disease. These symptoms are divided into cognitive features, behavioral features, mood features, and motor features.<sup>14</sup> The list of cognitive symptoms includes memory impairment, executive dysfunction, impaired attention, dementia, cognitive impairment, and reduced intelligence, among others.<sup>15</sup> However, memory impairment, executive dysfunction, and impaired attention are noted to be “core diagnostic clinical feature[s,]” meaning they were experienced by at least 70% of the confirmed cases of CTE.<sup>16</sup> If a person has CTE, they will almost certainly have one of these three symptoms, so I will focus on how these cognitive symptoms in

particular would impair a CTE sufferer's rationality. Firstly, memory impairment would inhibit one's ability to use their memory of past experiences and of facts about the world to make rational decisions. Secondly, impaired attention would make one unable to recall information that they failed to attend to and thus inhibit them from using this information to make rational decisions. Thirdly, executive dysfunction implies a dysfunction in normal executive functions, which the American Psychological Association defines as "higher level cognitive processes of planning, decision making, problem solving, [and similar processes.]"<sup>17</sup> These higher-level cognitive processes are encompassed in the broader category of reasoning skills, so an agent who starts experiencing executive dysfunction is essentially being stripped of their ability to properly reason. Thus, all three of the core cognitive features of CTE directly interfere with the individual's ability to maintain full use of their rational capacity. Since one with CTE would in all likelihood experience one or more of these symptoms, their rational capacity would almost necessarily be compromised by the disease.

Importantly, playing college football would increase one's risk of developing CTE. CTE was originally identified mainly in professional boxers, but in 2005 the first case in an NFL player was identified.<sup>18</sup> Since then, many more players have been diagnosed postmortem. A 2017 study autopsied the brains of former football players, including former NFL players, those who played only through college, and a few who played only through high school. 177 of the 202 brains, almost 90%, were diagnosed with CTE.<sup>19</sup> Although this does not show that playing football inevitably leads to CTE, it shows that football players are at significant risk. A 2013 study found that "[i]n American football players with neuropathologically confirmed CTE, there is a positive correlation with the severity of pathology and the total number of years played."<sup>20</sup> Thus, playing in high school and in college places one more at risk for CTE than playing only in high school. Football is a high contact sport that increases the likelihood of concussive and subconcussive hits, as "human-to-human collisions are fundamental to play."<sup>21</sup> Since these hits are the underlying cause of CTE, the nature of football itself lends itself to the development of CTE. Given that playing



college football makes one more susceptible to CTE and its cognitive symptoms, playing college football substantially raises the risk of damaging one's rational capacity.

By putting yourself at a high risk of developing a neurodegenerative disease like CTE, you are treating yourself as a mere means. For, treating oneself as a mere means is essentially committing some act that threatens or destroys one's human dignity—we have a perfect duty to avoid committing such acts. Since human dignity is linked to our rational capacities, we have a perfect duty to avoid impairing our own rationality. Furthermore, avoiding acts that impair our rationality includes not performing acts that put one at a significantly higher risk of impairing our rationality, especially when such risk is preventable. Playing college football puts one at a strikingly high risk of contracting CTE, which impairs one's reasoning skills, so this pursuit violates our perfect duty to avoid impairing our own rationality. You are not respecting your own dignity if you compromise your rational capacity to pursue this end, as accepting the risks of CTE amounts to treating yourself as an object meant only for achieving your end of playing college football. Even though CTE is not an inevitability when one pursues college football, any additional years of play put one at substantially higher risk of developing the disease. This risk is preventable (one need only not play football or other activities that are conducive to head hits) and should be avoided to fulfill a crucial negative duty. Thus, returning to the case in question, Max should realize that accepting his offers to play college football would not be an adequate way to fulfill the Kantian duty of self-development.

#### **IV) The Tom Brady Objection**

The conclusion that it is unethical for anyone to play college football is a radical one, and football fans might be inclined to reject the notion that this end is not an adequate one for the duty of self-perfection. These fans might argue that there is value in a highly talented player pursuing the game. After all, the ends involved in self-development are supposed to be beneficial for the larger community, not just the agent themselves. A naturally gifted player would add entertainment value to the sport and enhance its import to fans. The entertainment value in



watching football comes from not merely sensual pleasures through visual stimulation but also cognitive pleasures through analyzing game play and statistics. Thus, players should cultivate their talents to help the world make use of their rationality. Don't prodigies like Tom Brady owe it to the world to develop their football skills?

My response to this objection is that perfect duties always take precedence over imperfect duties. Even if an end achieves some of the aims of self-perfection, it should not be pursued if it violates a perfect duty. Since playing college football violates a perfect duty to avoid impairing the player's rationality, this end should not be sought out to fulfill any imperfect duty. Thus, playing college football is not an adequate end for the duty of self-perfection or for the duty of taking on others' ends as one's own (in this case, others' ends would involve finding fulfillment through watching talented college football players).

With a player as talented as Tom Brady, it may seem foolish to say that he should pursue some path that might not benefit the world as much. However, it is important to acknowledge that every person has a variety of talents that they *could* cultivate. It is our responsibility to think rationally about what talents to cultivate, but we have options when it comes to which talents to cultivate. For instance, Tom Brady played both baseball and football in high school. He is known to have passed up an opportunity to play professional baseball so that he could instead play football at the University of Michigan. Who is to say that Brady could not have reached a skill level in baseball comparable to his prodigious football skills? Had he cultivated his baseball talents instead, he might have still provided substantial entertainment value for sports fans. Since baseball poses less of a risk of concussive and subconcussive hits compared to football, perhaps the rational choice for Tom Brady would have been to play baseball rather than play quarterback at Michigan.

### **V) The Scholarship Objection**

Another objection to my conclusion that no one should pursue college football regards the many Americans who are not in financial positions that allow them to receive a college education without a football scholarship. Receiving

a college education is arguably the best way to promote human dignity. It teaches one to think rationally about the world, learn information that might aid with decision-making, and come up with creative solutions to problems. Furthermore, an education opens up one's career options. Receiving an education thus helps one become well-rounded. It leaves open a variety of life paths to potentially pursue, and it improves one's ability to rationally reflect on which of these paths would promote the most human capacities. Why should one skip out on a college education to avoid playing football when receiving an education is so important for promoting human dignity?

In response to this objection, I counter that the rational value in an education would be severely undermined by any CTE-induced neurodegeneration. Suppose Max can receive his college education only by way of a football scholarship. He knows about the risks of head trauma and makes it a goal to play football through college and then quit the game to take on whatever life path seems the most rational choice. However, those four years of play still put him at significant risk of developing CTE and losing much of his cognitive abilities. Whatever path Max chooses after graduation, he would not be able to exercise his full human dignity along this post-graduation path. The neurodegeneration that would likely occur 8-10 years after his first spree of hits to the head would compromise his ability to reason, so whatever skills he cultivated to pursue a self-improvement-related end would not represent the fullest possible cultivation of such skills. If his symptoms are severe, he might not perform adequately in any (rationality-related) career. Thus, the important skills developed through education might not be developed to the same extent in a college football player, and the education would not be as valuable.

If Max chooses to play college football in this situation, he is still using himself as a mere means. The only difference is that he would be using himself as a mere means for the end of receiving an education rather than for the end of cultivating his tackle football skills. Thus, the Kantian should rule out accepting the football scholarship as an adequate way of fulfilling the duty of self-perfection. If the only way to become educated is to violate a perfect

duty, one should pursue a purpose that does not require an education. Proper rational reflection on how to go about self-developing would take into consideration the circumstances of one's life. If those circumstances make receiving an education either immoral or impossible, then one should set rational goals that are achievable without an education.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, playing American tackle football in college is not the ideal way to work toward Kantian self-improvement. When a player is talented and enjoys the sport, a goal of playing college football would in fact be possible, worthwhile (not foolish), and cultivate a multitude of human capacities. However, college football places players at higher risk of developing CTE and violates a negative duty to avoid impairing one's rationality due to the risk of neurodegeneration. Playing the sport therefore amounts to players treating themselves as mere means, so it is a morally impermissible end that should not be taken on for self-perfection. More generally, with a Kantian ethical framework, it can never be rational to pursue a goal that might compromise one's rationality.

Many are now realizing the dangers in playing football and that it is not worth the risk of brain damage. In 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Pediatric Society published a paper advising that children should not play "high-impact contact sports... and willfully damage their developing brains."<sup>22</sup> Since the 2008-2009 season, the number of high school football players has steadily declined every season besides 2013-2014.<sup>23</sup> This change may reflect how parents intuitively realize the moral danger in compromising their children's cognitive functioning. Even some of the most talented professional football players have said that they would not let their children play contact football. For instance, retired quarterback Brett Favre in 2018 said he "would much rather be a caddie for [his grandsons] in golf than watch them play football... People say, 'I can't believe he would say that.' But you know, head injuries are going to continue. The quality of player is only going to go up, and that means concussions are not going to go down. So it's a scary issue."<sup>24</sup> In response to growing concerns, the

NFL has made over 50 rule changes since 2002 to prevent injuries.<sup>25</sup> Even so, it has not succeeded at preventing concussions.<sup>26</sup> Since the nature of tackle football is so conducive to human collisions, head trauma might be adequately prevented only by playing flag football (or some other non-contact form of football) at the youth, high school, collegiate, and professional levels.

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# Knowledge as Subjectively Justified True Belief (SJTB)

**Clodagh Hegarty**

Trinity College Dublin

## 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

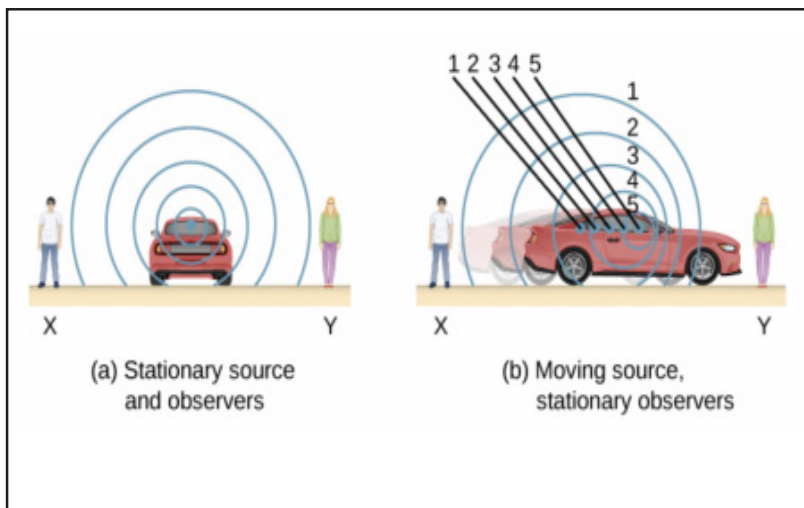
to think are true” (ibid., 54). On my account, this is not a discriminating criterion but merely describes how subjective belief, justification and truth are already entailed by this conception of knowledge.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

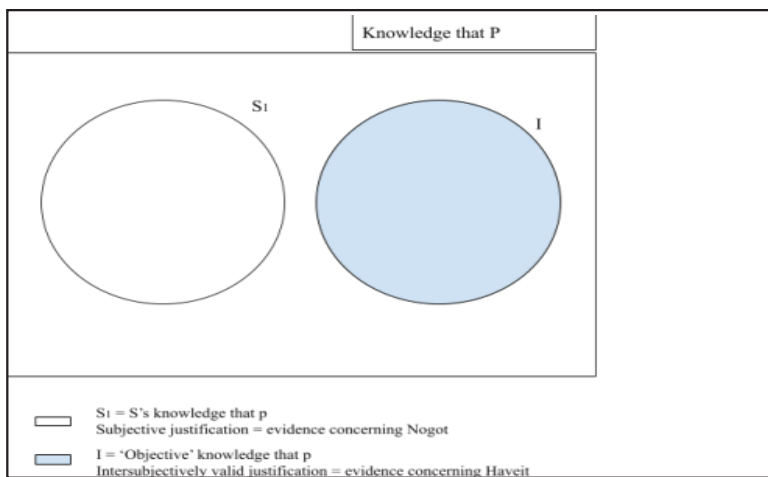
In case a), the subjects' knowledge *can* be intersubjectively validated, thus, 'objective' knowledge is possible. However, objective knowledge is not possible in case b). Certainly, the subjects may have some knowledge regarding wave dynamics and may be intuitively aware that the frequency they experience 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.

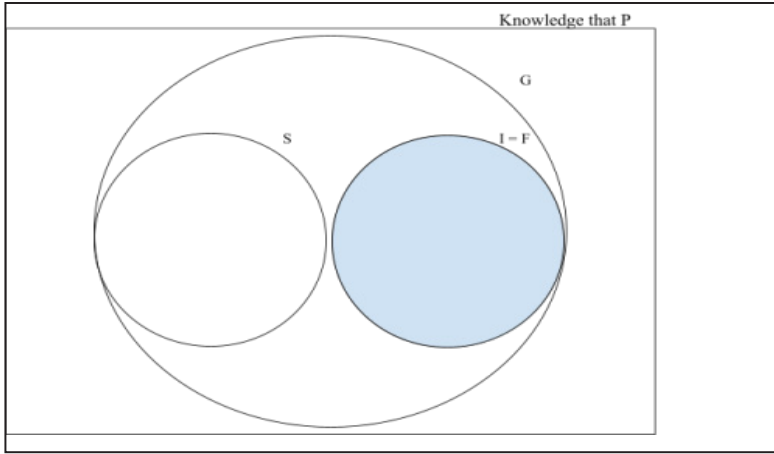


**Figure 2.**

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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