

# "Either Brown Is In Barcelona Or That Sheep Is Actually A Dog"

## SPHEX Club Presentation

Michael A. Gillette, Ph.D. January 10, 2019

### ABSTRACT

After outlining several reasons for why American society has recently seemed to move into what some have termed a “post truth era”, Dr. Gillette reviewed the classical view of the definition of knowledge that was originally developed by Plato. This theory of the nature of knowledge posits that in order for an individual properly to be said to possess knowledge about any proposition, it must be the case that s/he maintains a belief that the proposition is true, the proposition must be true, and the belief that the proposition is true must be epistemically justified. This theory of knowledge held sway until 1963, when Edmund Gettier published a seminal paper that produced apparently devastating counter-examples.

A group of counter-examples have been developed over the past several decades to bolster Gettier’s claim that knowledge cannot be Justified True Belief (JTB). After briefly describing several of these types of counter arguments to the JTB doctrine, Dr. Gillette reviewed a number of attempts to salvage or replace JTB. Ultimately, Dr. Gillette defended his conclusion that JTB was correct all along, although it applies only to logically necessary truths.

After accepting that true knowledge should only be claimed for propositions that are logically necessarily true, Dr. Gillette outlined his own view of the hierarchy of belief that organizes beliefs into four categories: 1) Knowledge, 2) Strong Belief, 3) Weak Belief, 4) False Belief. He then went on to examine some possible reasons why people have begun to mis-identify the types of beliefs that they have, including a critique of the rhetorical device of “speaking one’s truth”. The paper concluded with an appeal for increased intellectual rigor, heightened critical thinking, enhanced recognition of our own fallibility, and a re-invigorated willingness to engage in constructive debate.

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## PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

I love living in Lynchburg. I moved here in 1990 to take up an academic appointment at what was then Randolph-Macon Woman's College, now the co-educational Randolph College, and to teach clinical ethics at the Lynchburg Family Practice Residency. My wife Jodi and I set down roots here, raised two children here, and drew both sets of parents down here where they are now happily living out their retirement. I grew a business here, we became engaged in the community on a number of levels by volunteering in various capacities, and I am proud to have been elected thrice to Lynchburg City Council and to have served twice as our City's Mayor. Like I said, I love Lynchburg. I love the quality of life; I love the cost of living; I love the pace of life; I love the beautiful surroundings. But living in Lynchburg is not just pleasant. At times it is also "interesting". And interesting is not always pleasant.

I cannot tell you the number of times that Lynchburgers have explained to me the difference between what I "believe" and what they "know". They do this even though they have little information about what I actually do believe, but they are certain that they have sufficient information about what I do not know. On any number of occasions I have been asked if I was aware of the "truth" and tutored as to how it might "set me free". In most such encounters the initiators are polite and I am sure mean only the best. They are concerned for me, or more likely, they are concerned for not just me – the flesh and blood person who stands before you now – but for my immortal soul. The fact that I possess such a thing is not, for them, an hypothesis that is believed – a philosophical point to be discussed, examined, and debated – but a truth that is known. For many, the willingness to doubt such suppositions is not a sign of intellectual curiosity, but a failure of seeing the truth; a failure of knowledge.

To be sure, this phenomenon is not isolated to Lynchburg, and I doubt that it is even more prevalent here than in many other communities. In fact, the blurring of belief and knowledge is not limited to the realm of religion, but has now entered our national consciousness as part of our political dialogue. For instance, consider a now famous interview exchange that took place on “Meet The Press” on January 22, 2017. This was the day after Sean Spicer, President Trump’s then newly minted press secretary, blatantly lied to the American public about the size of Donald Trump’s inaugural crowd. Empirical evidence clearly refuted the President’s claim that his inauguration drew the largest crowd of any similar event in the history of the universe. Side-by-side photos of President Obama’s inaugural crowd and that of President Trump obviously revealed to all that Trump had massively inflated his own irresistible attractiveness and downplayed that of others. And then, the next morning, when the proof was clear and the administration should have backed away from its demonstrably false claims, presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway responded to questions about crowd size by explaining that Mr. Spicer had not lied or misled the American public. Instead, he was merely providing “alternative facts”.

More recently, during the bruising Senate hearings of now Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Christine Blasey Ford was asked to recount her experience regarding her accusation that she had been sexually assaulted decades earlier by Judge Kavanaugh when he was then a high school student. Many expressly stated that Dr. Blasey Ford must be heard, and that it was important for the public to “hear her truth”. Many also called for an opportunity to hear from Judge Kavanaugh, so that we might “hear his truth”. And although this confirmation hearing was arguably the most embarrassing display of partisan politics run amok on both the Republican and Democratic sides of the aisle, it struck me as wrong-headed in an even more fundamental way than merely as a case study in the need for term limits. It also starkly demonstrated what life will actually be like in what is now often referred to as a “post truth era”.

There can be no doubt that in a world of “alternative facts”, the truth is either ignored or distorted for political gain. But as noted above, the recent trend toward a “post truth era” is not always nefarious. Those who ask me whether or not I have been saved are not trying to hurt me, although their approach can be hurtful. They are trying to help me, because they believe that they are in the possession of knowledge which I lack, but for which I am in desperate need if I

am to protect the totality of my existence. As should be, people intuitively elevate claims of knowledge above claims of belief and accept the former as being epistemically superior to the latter. People really want to be sure that what they believe is true, and in order to do this they must claim not only to *believe* the propositions that they accept, but also to *know* that they are true. Knowledge and truth are linked, as are belief and fallibility, and there has always been a strong human urge to assert acquaintance with the former in order to blunt the impact of the latter.

For thousands of years, people have attempted to predicate their acceptance of specific propositions on the truth value of those propositions. We have understood that some propositions are true while others are false, and we have worked toward developing a set of epistemic assumptions that are calculated to contain more true assertions than false ones. In other words, we have attempted to increase the catalogue of what we know, and to understand clearly which mental commitments fall into the weaker set of propositional assertions that we define as belief. For millennia, we have believed that something only counts as knowledge when it is true. We have usually, although not always but ultimately, recognized that if our beliefs are inconsistent with reality, then it should be our beliefs that we adjust to match reality rather than the other way around. I fear that what has changed of late is that rather than attempting to comport our mental states to facts in the world, we now feel somehow free to change the “facts” of the world to match our beliefs. We then go on to state that since consistency has been achieved between what we believe and what is true, that what we actually have is knowledge.

Unfortunately, I do not believe that the state of affairs that I have described is simply some clever political ruse initiated to gain or to keep power. I am worried that people are actually, and not just rhetorically, accepting a subjective view of reality that warps the distinction between knowledge and belief. Therefore, unhappily, I feel compelled to embark on an important examination of a topic with which I am minimally comfortable—epistemology. What is the difference between knowledge and belief? How can we know that we know anything, and what are the dangers of being wrong about the distinction between knowledge and belief? Equally important, how can we talk about knowledge and belief in ways that are socially useful and

politically constructive? Before I can offer my own attempt to answer these questions, we need to review some basic ground in the theory of knowledge.

## PART TWO: JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF

Plato, in the *Theatetus* and speaking in the voice of Socrates, takes up the question “what is knowledge?”. The question is, what is the definitional distinction between knowing something and simply believing something? How can I be sure, for instance, that my dog loves me? I certainly believe that my dog loves me, but do I really know it in the same way that I know that the earth revolves around the sun, or if you are uncertain about that, that two plus two equals four? And why am I even concerned about being sure? What I really want to know is whether or not the proposition that “Sophie (my dog) loves Michael (me)” is true. Does it matter if I am sure, as long as it is true? Can I be sure even if it is not true? Why do I believe it at all? More importantly, why do I believe it more when I hold a frisbee in my hand, or a cookie, as opposed to the times when Sophie would rather chase a deer than walk by my side? That last bit is actually not accurate. Sometimes I think that Sophie loves me more precisely because I let her chase deer, so perhaps she loves me most when she is not on lead.

Notice how quickly in simply attempting to pose the question, I almost unavoidably included concepts of believing, certainty, and evidence. This is all consistent with what Plato argued thousands of years ago when he generated the foundational analysis of knowledge. Plato argued that in order for a person to know something, it must first be true that s/he believes it. Knowing something is a mental state, after all, so for anyone to know a proposition  $p$ , it must first be the case that the person maintains a mental state that  $p$ , which we refer to as a belief in  $p$ . But many beliefs can be false, and we surely cannot know that something is true when it is not. Therefore, in addition to believing that  $p$ ,  $p$  itself must be true. Even that is not enough for knowledge, however, because some beliefs that people have might be true, but they might simultaneously be unsupported. For instance, suppose that I believe that life exists on an earth-like planet in the system surrounding the star Vega. Suppose that 100 years from now we confirm that there are earth-like planets around Vega, and we confirm that some of those planets harbor life. Should it then be said that I knew all along that life existed in that star system? Most would say no. I currently do not have evidence that life exists in the Vega system, so any commitment that I

make to that proposition is merely belief. If, in the future, new evidence is discovered that supports my belief, then at that point my belief might be elevated to the level of knowledge. We would likely say that for a century I held a belief without support, and then, as it turns out, that belief was correct. If I am fortunate enough to be both alive and cognitively intact 100 years from now, then I will have knowledge about life around Vega. Any who are alive at that time could say, “Wow, Mike had a lucky belief that we now know is true”. They would have the knowledge while I would have had only belief, at least up until the point that the evidence was discovered.

On the basis of this type of analysis of our intuitions, Plato developed a theory of knowledge known as the Justified True Belief analysis, which we will refer to as JTB. JTB states that in order for any acceptance of a proposition *p* (e.g. my dog loves me) to be knowledge, it must be true that the person believes *p* (I believe that my dog loves me), that *p* is true (my dog actually loves me and is not just pretending), and that the person is justified in believing *p* (my dog exhibits symptoms of affection even when I am not holding a piece of pastrami).

As noted, the JTB concept of knowledge was so intuitively obvious and so analytically insightful that it was accepted as the operative definition of knowledge from 369 BCE, when the *Theatetus* was written, until 1963 CE. So what happened in 1963, other than the fact that I was born? The answer is that a two-and-a-half-page paper written by Edmund Gettier was published in a philosophical journal entitled “Analysis”. Before I can explain what Edmund Gettier argued in his paper, I need to make one quick point about logic.

According to standard rules of inference, a disjunction will be true just in case at least one of its disjuncts is true (if it is an inclusive disjunction) or if exactly one of its disjuncts is true (if it is an exclusive disjunction). Put into plain language, and using the easier example of an inclusive disjunction, the proposition that “either A or B” will be true if either “A” is true or “B” is true. Put into even more plain language, the statement that “either I am a human or I am a dog” will be true if either “I am a human” or “I am a dog”. The proposition that “I am either a human or I live in Lynchburg” will be true if either “I am a human” is true, or “I live in Lynchburg” is true, or “I

am a human and I live in Lynchburg” is true. The point is that a disjunction will be true even if only one of the disjuncts that make it up is true.

For those who have some acquaintance with formal logic, what I am describing now is The Law of Disjunctive Addition, sometimes also referred to as The Law of Disjunctive Introduction. This law states that if ‘p’, then ‘either p or q’, regardless of the content of q. Put into normal language, if I know that something is true, call it p, then I also know that either p is true or anything else that I choose to add to a disjunction containing p as one of the disjuncts is also true. Therefore, the proposition “either I am a human or I live on Mars” is true even if I do not live on Mars, so long as I am a human. Of course the proposition would also be true if it turns out that I am not a human, but I do live on Mars. The point is that only one of the disjuncts needs to be true in order for the entire disjunction to have a positive truth value. And this is where Gettier gets going.

In his paper, Gettier asks us to imagine an interesting situation. Suppose that we have a friend named Smith and that this friend has always owned Fords. He loves cars, so he has always owned a car and every one of them has been a Ford. Suppose that we also have a friend named Brown, and that Brown is a bit of a home-body; he does not like to travel at all. Now suppose that I believe a particular proposition. That proposition is in the form of a disjunction. I believe that “Either Smith owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona”. Now imagine that unknown to me, Smith is uncharacteristically between cars, and that he is presently renting a Chevy. It also turns out that Brown has uncharacteristically travelled to Barcelona, although I had no idea that he had done so. I believe that “either Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona”, but I believe it because I believe that Smith owns a Ford not because I believe that Brown is in Barcelona. Nevertheless, since I believe the disjunction and one of the disjuncts of the disjunction is true, then my belief is correct. Furthermore, I am justified in believing the disjunction because I have good reason to think that Smith owns a Ford. It is undeniably true that I believe a particular proposition (either Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona), that I have good justification for believing the proposition (It is well known that Smith loves cars and always drives a Ford), and that the proposition is true (Brown is actually in Barcelona). But do I actually know anything in this case? This is absolutely a case of Justified True Belief, but most would say that

I do not actually know anything. Therefore, it cannot be correct that knowledge is justified true belief. That thump you just heard was Plato rolling over in his grave after 2300 years.

As you can imagine, deposing Socrates was quite a coup and the philosophical community still has not quite recovered. Intense analysis followed the 1963 introduction of what is now commonly referred to as “The Gettier Problem”, and other variants have been introduced. Consider this one that was developed by Roderick Chisholm, a contemporary of Gettier, who was still teaching and with whom I studied in graduate school in the 1980s: Imagine that you are in a field and you see what appears to be a sheep happily grazing some distance off. You adopt a belief in the proposition that “there is a sheep in that field”. Now imagine that there actually is a sheep in the field, but that it is hidden behind a hill such that you cannot see it. At the same time, what you took to be a sheep was actually a dog in sheep’s clothing. It was a dog whose owner dressed it up as a sheep (don’t ask me why, Chisholm didn’t say). The point is that once again you maintain a belief: “There is a sheep in that field”, the belief is true: there actually is a sheep in the field, but the justification that you have for believing in the proposition is predicated on an error because you based your belief on the fact that what you saw looked like a sheep when it was actually a dog. Do you really know anything about whether or not there is a sheep in the field? Even without a disjunction involved, we have now generated a Justified True Belief that does not count as knowledge. Therefore, it cannot be true that something is knowledge just in case it is justified true belief. That thump you just heard was Plato and Socrates rolling over in their respective graves.

### PART THREE: SALVAGE ATTEMPTS

Over the years there have been many attempts to solve the Gettier Problems and to either save JTB as an accurate analysis of what constitutes knowledge or to replace it with some other concept of knowledge. In my estimation, and that of most epistemologists, almost none of these efforts have worked. Some efforts concentrated on specific aspects of the Gettier problems and attempted to rule them out. For instance, the Gettier Problems seem uniformly to contain an element of epistemic luck. In other words, while we might be justified in believing something like a disjunctive proposition, it is not for the reasons that we think, and we just got lucky that the proposition happened to be true. To go back to the original version of the Gettier counter-

example to JTB, we were justified in believing that either Smith drives a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona. However, the justification was based on what we knew about Smith, but the truth of the proposition was based on Brown's whereabouts. Therefore, although our belief is true, it is only accidentally so. This counter to Gettier would require not only that we are correct in our belief, but that the correctness of our belief is related to the justification that we have for the belief. If it is not, then we are just lucky in getting our beliefs right, and surely we cannot be said to possess knowledge.

Likewise, when examining the Chisholm variation of the Gettier Problem, our acceptance of a proposition is based on visual evidence, but that evidence turned out to be misleading. It would be odd to claim that we know something even if we do not know why we know it, so false evidence would be a rule-out for knowledge. The fact that the dog looked like a sheep was a good reason to believe that there is a sheep in the field, but we do not actually know that there is a sheep in the field because our evidence is faulty. Again, there is an element of luck. We are just lucky that there is a sheep behind the hill. If there were not, then although our justification would not change for believing that there is a sheep in the field, the truth of the proposition would. We would not know anything, and from our position on the road we would be utterly unable to distinguish between the true situation and the false one. In both cases we see what looks like a sheep, and that is why we believe that there is a sheep in the field. Our mental state does not change whether there is a sheep behind the hill or not, so how could we claim to know a truth in one case but have only a false belief in the other?

Based on the arguments presented in the previous two paragraphs, some philosophers have claimed that we need to develop a JTB-plus theory. In other words, JTB is close to being correct, so it needs just a minor tweak to overcome Gettier type problems. They would say that knowledge is JTB without luck (Eliminate Luck Proposal), or JTB without false evidence (No False Evidence Proposal). There have been additional efforts to save JTB by adding some other sorts of clarification. Some have argued that JTB is knowledge so long as for any proposition  $p$  there is no competing justification for belief that not- $p$  that would weaken the justification for believing  $p$  (No Defeat Proposal). Others have tried to save JTB by ruling out inappropriate causality. This view states that a belief in  $p$  will only count as knowledge when the facts that

cause p to be true are also directly causally related to the development of the belief in p (Appropriate Causality Proposal).

These efforts to save JTB can be summarized as follows:

**Eliminate Luck Proposal:** Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the correctness of the belief is not based on epistemic luck.

**No False Evidence Proposal:** Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the justification for believing P is not based on false information.

**No Defeat Proposal:** Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* there is no comparable evidence for believing not-p.

**Appropriate Causality Proposal:** Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the belief in p was caused by the same factors that make p true.

But as a class, all of these efforts fail because it becomes impossible to determine the degree to which luck disqualifies knowledge, or false evidence is misleading, or indirect causality is irrelevant. Surely we can gain some knowledge by accident or indirectly, but at some point those factors do legitimately call into question just where the boundary lies between knowledge and belief. We seem lost, and understanding what counts as knowledge seems out of our grasp. But I will argue that this is only because we like to claim knowledge in inappropriate ways. We are prone to an epistemological overreach that if corrected, allows JTB to remain intact as-is even in the face of Gettier Problems.

#### PART FOUR: THE INFALLIBILITY PROPOSAL

There is one solution to the Gettier Problem that does not require the development of any new theory of knowledge and which has the added benefit of resting on a pre-existing rationalist philosophical tradition. Perhaps the most famous exposition of this view, or perhaps I should say technique, was provided by Rene Descartes. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641, Descartes argued that if we want to be sure about anything, then we must first discard all that can be doubted and begin again to construct a view of reality that is based only on those

ideas that cannot, in themselves, be incorrect. He began with one irrefutable truth: cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am). The beauty of Descartes' argument is that it does not depend on the accuracy of anything that a person thinks. It is possible that every thought that a creature has could be false. Nevertheless, in order for an entity to have thoughts, it must exist to have them. Cogito ergo sum! Descartes could just as easily have said "I am mistaken, therefore I am". I might be wrong about every belief that I have, but I must exist in order to be mistaken. If I believe anything, then I must exist in order to have that belief. Therefore, my belief that I exist is absolutely, undeniably, infallibly true. All the rest of my beliefs might be false, but the one belief that I exist must be true. In fact, notwithstanding the great pains that Descartes took to build the world up from that irreducible truth, even if that is the only justified true belief that I have, I can at least say that I KNOW this one TRUTH. For me, this type of truth, limited as it might be, is sufficient.

According to the Infallibility Proposal, a belief in  $p$  will be knowledge of  $p$  whenever holding  $p$  as a mental state is Justified True Belief and the justification for believing  $p$  is the logical impossibility of not- $p$ .

For many, the Infallibility Proposal is far too restrictive. They have argued that if this is how we save JTB, then what use is JTB? Beyond the cogito, we could know nothing, and yet surely we want to have a broader concept of knowledge. To these philosophers, salvaging JTB comes at too high a price. According to the infallibility proposal, the only things that we can actually know are things that could not possibly be not true. But, according to its detractors, that view of knowledge is too limited. I disagree.

If we adopt the infallibility proposal, then we still have access to all a-priori knowledge. Not only will I know that I exist, via the cogito, but I will also know that two plus two equals four. I will know anything that can be proven logically, including not only mathematical truths, but also all the truths of symbolic logic. In fact, I will be able to know whatever can be proven to be logically necessary, including firm knowledge about the negation of internally logically inconsistent propositions. On this basis I can know that certain propositions are true, and I can know that others are false. I will also be able to have knowledge about conditional propositions

such as “if you believe in X then you must also believe in Y”. I might be limited to the realm of syllogistic reasoning, but I will still have a wealth of knowledge that I can use in day-to-day living.

The result of my acceptance of the infallibility response to the Gettier problems compels me to generate a hierarchy of belief that, if adopted, might help us in our current emotionally charged social environment. I propose the following taxonomy of belief:

- 1) Knowledge should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true only when that belief is true and justified, and where the justification for the belief is infallible (i.e. logically necessary).
- 2) Strong Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when that belief is potentially fallible but rigorously justified, and where rigor is understood to involve careful assessment of the veracity of the proposition and the effort to rule out alternative explanations for belief in the proposition (this option subsumes the arguments from luck, false evidence, no contrary evidence, and appropriate causality).
- 3) Weak Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when the belief is poorly justified or unjustified, but not demonstrably false (i.e. the belief that not-p is not Knowledge).
- 4) False Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when the proposition can be shown to be empirically incorrect or internally inconsistent (i.e. we have Knowledge that not-p).

I would like to argue tonight that many of the difficulties that we face as a society are based on our unwillingness to recognize in our own belief systems, or an unwillingness to point out in the belief systems of others, the distinction between the different levels of belief that I have defined above. I believe that there are good ethical as well as epistemological reasons to claim that individuals have a duty to avoid holding what I have termed false beliefs. But I do not believe that it would be ethically or epistemologically sound to insist that people only adopt knowledge as a legitimate level of belief. It is ethically acceptable to point out to others when they hold false beliefs and to afford to those beliefs no authority in our interpersonal relations except in the most trivial of circumstances (e.g. allowing children to believe in the Tooth Fairy). It would not

be ethical to force anyone to reject beliefs that are either strong or weak. As an example, although it is not my topic tonight, I believe that only a small number of people's religious views are "false". Most are probably "weak beliefs", some, or some portion of some people's religious views might qualify as "strong beliefs", and only a very few uncommon religious views could be termed "knowledge". Nevertheless, I make no claims tonight about the nature or value of faith, at least beyond arguing that when people approach me in Kroger to tell me what they know, they, I, and most of the world would be far better off if they were to recognize that what they claim to be true is, for them, just a strongly maintained weak belief. Life would go a lot more smoothly if we were less certain that we knew the truth, and less certain that others did not.

#### PART FIVE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

What has happened in our society that has caused us to become so truth-immune? Why have we downgraded the value of knowledge, and how have we come to elevate the weakest of beliefs to the most strident of views? My theory on this is not cynical. While I do not doubt for a moment that much of this effort has been perpetrated purposefully in order to enhance position and consolidate power, I also believe that this reality snuck up on us based on more sympathetic impulses.

Over the years, I have heard many people exclaim "Let me speak my truth!". This demand is usually made by individuals who have historically been marginalized or even subjugated. Those who benefit from insensitive power structures might describe a social reality that comports with their experiences and communicates their perspective. "There is no racial bias in our justice system" they might claim, "our courts are fair and demonstrate no prejudice against racial minorities". In response, those who are victimized by existing power structures are likely to say "Let me speak *my* truth! Let me tell you what life looks like from my vantage point. Let me 'speak truth to power'".

I understand exactly why we might talk this way. I understand exactly why Dr. Blasey Ford was given a chance to "speak her truth", and why Judge Kavanaugh was afforded an opportunity to "speak his truth". Nevertheless, I think that this sort of talk is dangerous. I have sympathy for why these expressions exist, but they give too much power to those who would abuse them.

When the disenfranchised person says “this is my truth”, s/he is not saying “there are multiple truths, each of which is valid. You have yours, I have mine. We have all heard yours, but now you need to hear mine”. In fact, the very same people who want to “speak their truth” also want to “speak truth to power”. The two are inconsistent. If there is a truth that is to stand up against power, it must be that the truth is correct and the power is not. We are not trying to enter an “alternate truth” on the record for people to consider. We are demonstrating that what was taken to be the truth all along was not accurate; that it was not true. When a person “speaks his truth”, s/he is actually speaking *the* truth that has hitherto been unseen by those in positions of authority. However, by adding the word ‘mine’ to the word ‘truth’, truth itself appears subjective, and we inadvertently give people permission to fashion their own truths and to ignore the truths of others. This type of speech backfires on those using it by implying that truth is something that disparate individuals can create for themselves; that truth is not deeply factual. It implies that there are sets of truths, each mutually exclusive of the others, and that we have the right to choose which truth set to adopt. It invites belief in “alternative facts”, and it insidiously undermines rational discourse. I understand why we talk this way. I just think that we need to stop.

#### PART SIX: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

So where do we go from here? How can we simultaneously recognize and respect the perspectives of people other than ourselves without subjectivizing facts? To clarify, I do not in any way reject the view that alternative descriptions of reality can often sound contradictory while they are simultaneously true. For instance, while I am giving this lecture, there is a screen behind me onto which there is a projection of a PowerPoint presentation that I prepared for this evening. I believe that the PowerPoint projection is behind me. However, I am in the minority. All the rest of you in the room are able to look up at the screen that is in front of you. Since you are the majority, you could vote on acceptance of a proposition – “PowerPoint presentations are in front of people”. From your perspective, this might be a very justified belief, and since it is also demonstrably true, you could confidently say that you have knowledge about the fact that “The PowerPoint presentation is in front”. Simultaneously, I believe that the PowerPoint presentation is behind me. That belief is justified and it is true. I can be said to have Knowledge that “The PowerPoint presentation is behind”. In the PowerPoint case, both of our beliefs are

true because both assert the truth of a relational property that varies depending upon the orientation of the speaker.

However, if my view is ignored by you or, more to the point, if my opinions and views are routinely disregarded because you do not take me seriously as a person, then you might go on to make global assertions about the position of PowerPoint presentations. You might create an entire society that is based on the supposition that PowerPoint presentations are to the front. You might fail to recognize the subjectivity of your claims and you might assert them as objective facts. You might get angry when anyone tries to tell you that PowerPoint presentations can sometimes be behind people. Worse than marginalizing my view, you might not see me at all and you might not hear about my experiences in any way. You could be raised in a world where it is obvious that PowerPoint presentations are in front of people. If you hear otherwise, you would be likely to dismiss such claims as childish ignorant banter. If I state my view forcefully, you might label me an agitator and attack, imprison, or kill me. You would do all these things because you KNOW that PowerPoints are to the front, and my statement that they are to the back threatens your most cherished feelings about PowerPoint.

At some point, if there are enough people like me, however, we might rise up and demand to be heard, exclaiming in the most courageous ways “Let me speak MY truth!! The PowerPoint is not to the front. It is actually to the rear. And you, who have ignored those whose backs are to the PowerPoint must wake up and see the error of your ways. Yours is not the only truth. My truth counts too, and I must be heard. Furthermore, you must accept my truth just as you accept your own. You must stop discriminating against those whose backs are to the PowerPoint!! Speakers have rights too! Stand up all ye whose backs have been to the PowerPoint. We have been silent too long. Our Truth must be heard!!”

This fanciful tirade should make one thing obvious. There are not two truths here – one for the speaker and one for the audience – and it is very dangerous to claim otherwise. There is one truth. The PowerPoint is to the front of the audience *and* to the back of the speaker. There is subjectivity in perception based on the spatial relationship between screen, speaker, and audience, but there is one description of the world that is correct about the relative position of

these people and things. The audience was wrong when they claimed to know that PowerPoints are always to the front. The speaker was wrong in accepting that “that might be true for you, but I have an alternate truth”. And although the speaker might use these sorts of phrases when demanding a place at the table, such pronouncements do not even convey his/her true intent. As an historically subjugated speaker I am not merely attempting to describe my experiences and my perspective. I am trying to change your view of the truth. I am attempting to reveal *the* truth, not just *a* truth. And although it might be rhetorically effective to state otherwise, I am actually asserting that you do not have complete knowledge about the position of the screen. Reality is more complex than you think. But if I only make statements about my view, I also lack knowledge. To gain true knowledge, I must describe the wider picture that subsumes both my perspective on the screen’s position and yours. The true proposition is that “The PowerPoint presentation is in front of the majority of people but simultaneously behind others”. One truth; no possession over it.

In these times, perhaps more than ever, we need to put out a renewed call for increased intellectual rigor, heightened critical thinking, enhanced recognition of our own fallibility, and a re-invigorated willingness to engage in constructive debate. But none of that can happen if we are too sure of our own views, too certain of our own positions, and unable to distinguish between knowledge and belief.

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- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy “The Analysis of Knowledge”, 2017

# Either Brown Is In Barcelona Or That Sheep Is Actually A Dog

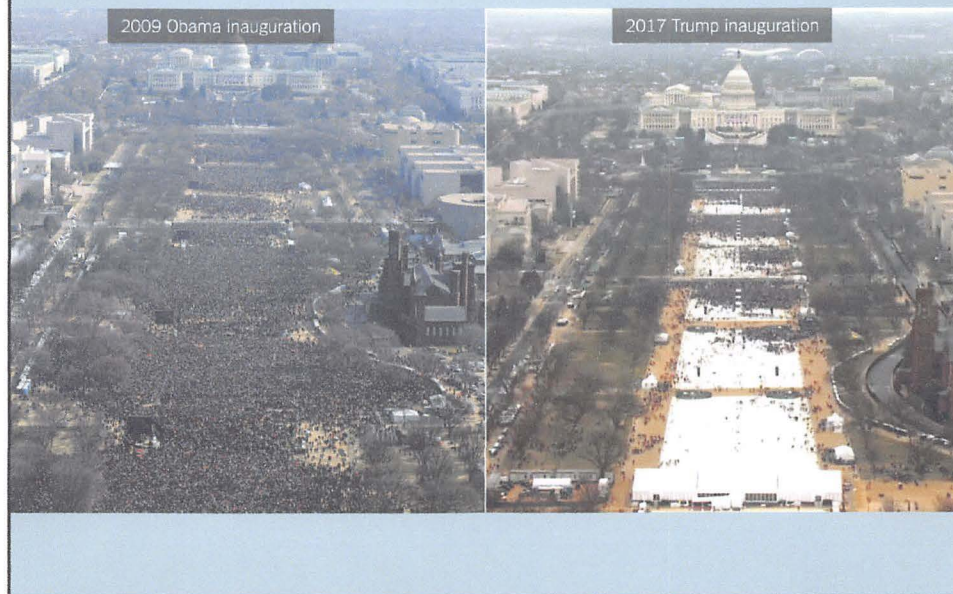
Michael A. Gillette, Ph.D.

SPHEX Club

January 10, 2019

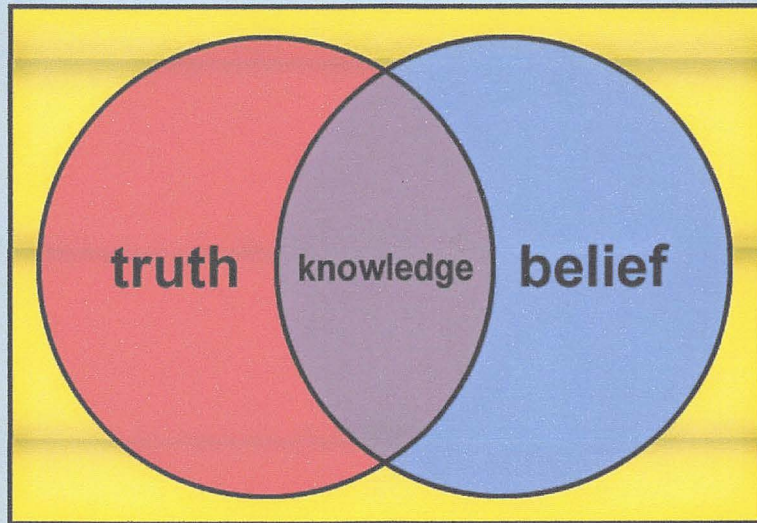
1

## Alternative Facts



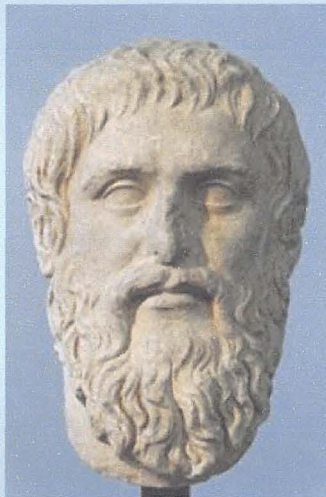
2

## Belief and Knowledge



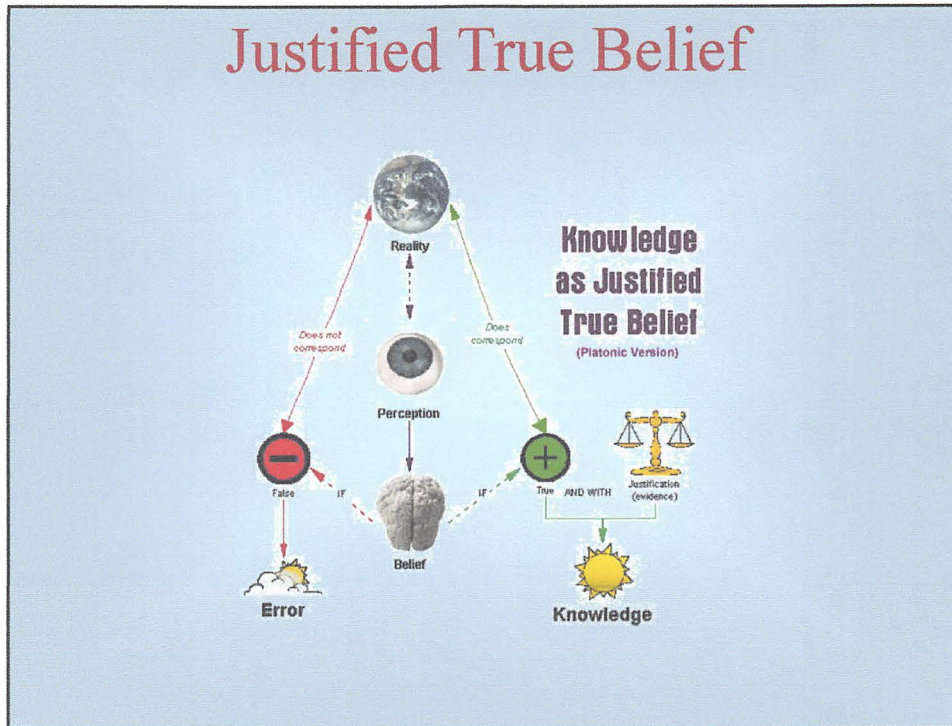
3

## Plato



4

## Justified True Belief



5

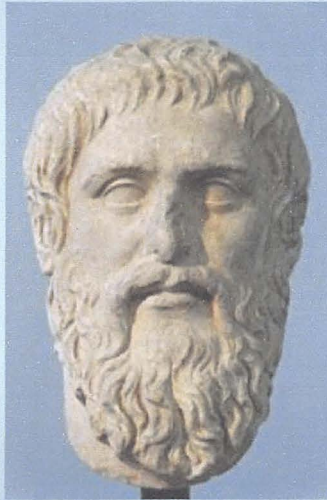
## Justified True Belief (JTB)

In order for person A to have knowledge that X, three things must be true:

1. A must believe X
2. X must be true
3. A must be justified in believing X (i.e. A has good reason for believing X)

6

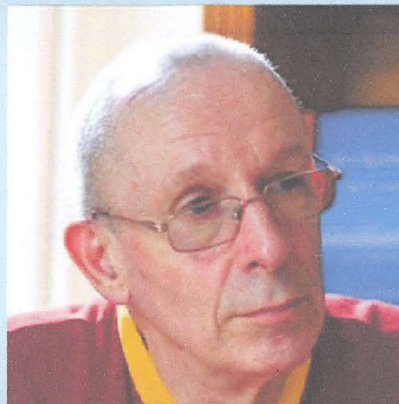
# Plato



369BCE

7

# Edmund Gettier



1963CE

8

## Inclusive Disjunctions

If (A) or (B) then (A or B)

(A or B) if (A) or (B)

9

## Inclusive Disjunctions

I am human or I am a dog

if

I am either human or I am a  
dog

if I am a human or I am a  
dog then I am either a  
human or a dog

10

## Inclusive Disjunctions

I am human or I live in Lynchburg  
If  
(I am human) or (I live in Lynchburg)

11

## The Law of Disjunctive Addition

If (p) then (p or q)

12

## The Law of Disjunctive Addition

I am human or I live on Mars

If Either

(I am human)

Or

(I live on Mars)

13

## The Law of Disjunctive Addition

Since it is true that I am human

It is also true that

Either I am human or I live on Mars

14

## The Gettier Problem

Smith loves cars and always drives a Ford.

Brown hates to travel.

I believe that "Either Smith owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona"

15

## The Gettier Problem

As it turns out, Smith does not have a Ford

Uncharacteristically, Brown is in Barcelona

For good reason, I believe that Smith has a Ford.

For good reason, I believe that Brown is NOT in Barcelona.

16

## The Gettier Problem

By the Law of Disjunctive Addition, my belief that “either Smith has a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona” is correct.

By the Law of Disjunctive Addition, my belief that “either Smith has a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona” is justified.

17

## The Gettier Problem

I believe that (either Smith has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona).

My belief that (either Smith has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona) is justified.

My belief that (either Smith has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona) is true.

My belief that (either Smith has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona) satisfies JTB.

18

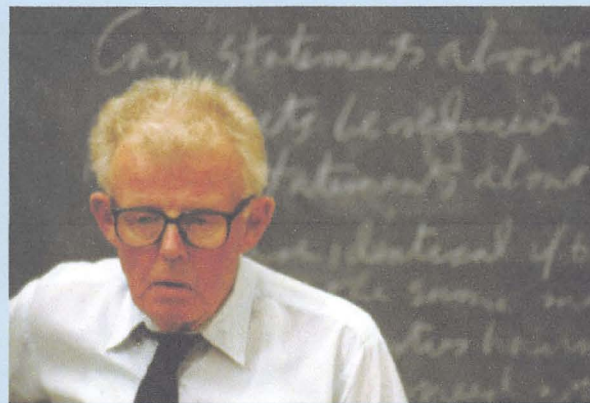
## The Gettier Problem

But surely when I believe that either Smith  
has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona,  
I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!!!!!

**So the claim that knowledge is  
defined as Justified True Belief  
MUST BE FALSE!!!!!**

19

## Roderick Chisholm



20

## The Chisholm Variation

I see something in the field that looks like a sheep,  
but it is actually a dog.

I believe that there is a sheep in the field

Unseen by me, there actually is a hidden sheep  
in the field, so my belief is justified and true.

I am justified in believing that there  
is a sheep in the field.

Nevertheless, I cannot properly be said to  
**KNOW** that there is a sheep in the field.

21

## An Easy Mistake



So JTB must be false.

22

## Salvage Attempts

### Eliminate Luck Proposal

Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the correctness of the belief is not based on epistemic luck.

23

## Salvage Attempts

### No False Evidence Proposal

Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the justification for believing P is not based on false information.

24

## Salvage Attempts

### No Defeat Proposal

Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* there is no comparable evidence for believing not-p.

25

## Salvage Attempts

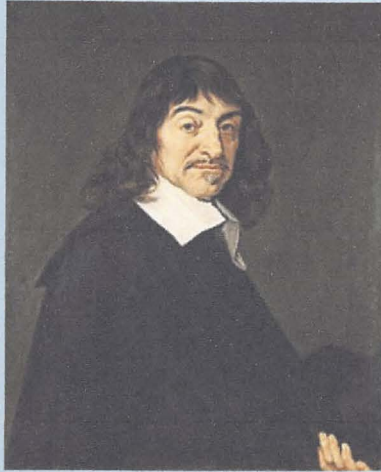
### Appropriate Causality Proposal

Belief in p will be knowledge of p whenever holding p as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the belief in p was caused by the same factors that make p true.

26

## Rene Descartes

1596-1650



Cogito ergo sum.

I think, therefore I am.

27

## A Better Salvage Attempt

### The Infallibility Proposal

Belief in  $p$  will be knowledge of  $p$  whenever holding  $p$  as a mental state is Justified True Belief *and* the justification for believing  $p$  is the logical impossibility of not- $p$ .

28

## Knowledge Defined

### The Gillette Proposal

Knowledge should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true only when that belief is true and justified, and where the justification for the belief is infallible (i.e. logically necessary).

29

## Knowledge Defined

### The Gillette Proposal

Strong Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when that belief is potentially fallible but rigorously justified, and where rigor is understood to involve careful assessment of the veracity of the proposition and the effort to rule out alternative explanations for belief in the proposition (this option subsumes the arguments from luck, false evidence, no contrary evidence, and appropriate causality).

30

## Knowledge Defined

### The Gillette Proposal

Weak Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when the belief is poorly justified or unjustified, but not demonstrably false (i.e. the belief that not-p is not Knowledge).

31

## Knowledge Defined

### The Gillette Proposal

False Belief should be defined as a belief that a proposition is true when the proposition can be shown to be empirically incorrect or internally inconsistent (i.e. we have Knowledge that not-p).

32

## Knowledge Defined

### The Gillette Proposal

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33

## Discussion?



34

## Sources

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## SPHEX CLUB TREASURER'S REPORT 1/24/19

Consider "P": Either the SpheX Club has \$379.04 in the Bank of the James, or Marc Schewel is on a trip to the Cayman Islands.

If either disjoint is true, then "P" is true.

Or as Dr. Jeff Wilson would say, quoting a famous playwright, "To P or not to P," that is the question.

Regarding Marc Schewel's current location, I think, therefore I am . . . in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Those persons sitting behind me can verify that statement, but those sitting in front of me might think I've already gone to where I'm going next week – the Cayman Islands.

As for the money in the Bank of the James, it would be false to believe that I actually deposited real money, like cash and coins, because in reality it was only rectangular slips of paper marked up with our Club members' illegible handwriting.

Further, it would be a weak belief to think that those slips of paper are better in the bank than under my Schewel's mattress since the Club is not receiving any interest from the bank.

My strong belief is that, wherever those slips of paper may reside, that don't amount to enough to pay for our upcoming annual meeting.

And so the truth is that soon we will be sending out dues notices, and if you want to stay in the Club and enjoy the opportunity to spend many hours preparing lectures that hopefully will keep half the audience awake, you had better pay up.