

Justified Untrue Beliefs

Edmund Gettier's 1968 paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" changed the epistemology forever. Since its publishing, philosophers have been trying to devise ways to strengthen the classic tripartite analysis of knowledge by either modifying its clauses or adding new ones. However, for each new analysis of knowledge offered, stronger Gettier cases have been developed in response. More radical departures from the tripartite analysis have also been proposed, such as Tim Williamson's knowledge-first approach, which claims that knowledge is an unanalysable concept. But the debate about whether—and how—knowledge can be defined is still ongoing. I believe there are philosophical reasons to believe knowledge is important and to keep trying to find a way to define it. In this essay, however, I'll focus my attention on another epistemic issue, one that has been bringing dangerous consequences to society: Justified untrue beliefs—beliefs, that are false but that, due to the epistemic conditions of the subject, are justifiably believable. I will show how the way online journalism and social media work have led to the development of what philosopher C. Thi Nguyen calls epistemic bubbles and echo chambers—epistemic conditions that enable the existence of a kind of parallel reality that makes it possible for people to justifiably believe things that are blatantly not true. I will also explain how the way our brains have evolved makes us prone to fall for fake news and conspiracy theories. Finally, I will try to offer a glimmer of hope for this predicament, based on Bertrand Russell's perspective on the Greek sophists.

I

Before the publication of Gettier's landmark paper, it was widely agreed amongst philosophers that an analysis of knowledge could be broken down into three requirements. First, for something to be considered knowledge, it should be true—one cannot know something that is not true. Second, the person should believe in what she knows—one cannot know something if one doesn't believe in it. And finally, that belief

should be justified. In other words, simply believing in something that happens to be true with no justification for it does not amount to knowledge.

Here is an example of how the JTB analysis of knowledge works. Suppose I tell you that I know my daughter is at school as I write this. According to the JTB analysis of knowledge, for me to claim that I know that, first she must be at school. Then I need to believe that she's at school, and that belief must be justifiable. The fact that I dropped her at school this morning could be one way to justify my belief. I could also text her teacher and ask her to confirm that my daughter is there—she could even send me a video of my daughter as proof. Excluding the possibility of, say, me inadvertently being on hallucinogenic drugs right now, or of my daughter's teacher being able to use AI to create lifelike fake videos of my girl saying hi to me, it follows from the evidence I have that I know my daughter is at school. What Gettier did was to challenge this notion. By providing two counterexamples that show that even if something is true, believed by the subject, and justified, there is the possibility that it still cannot be considered knowledge, Gettier showed that justified true belief is not a sufficient condition for knowledge (Gettier, 1963). In his article, Gettier presents two cases. I will focus on one, to explain what a basic Gettier case is. Before anything, it's important to say that Gettier notes two points that should be accepted by the reader for his argument to work. First, that a person can be justified in believing a false proposition, which is, I believe, a very plausible proposition. It will be extremely important for me to build my case as well, and I will come back to it more carefully later in this essay. Gettier's second note refers to what is now called the closure principle. The idea is that, for any proposition, P, if one is justified in believing P, and if P entails Q, and if one deduces Q from P, and accepts Q as a result of this deduction, then one is justified in believing Q.

With these two key points in mind, here is how the first case presented by Gettier runs: there are two men, Smith and Jones, who have applied for the same job. Smith has evidence that Jones will get the job. Perhaps Smith knows the president of the company, who has told Smith Jones will get the job. Smith also has evidence that

Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. He might have seen Jones putting coins in his pocket and counted them himself, for instance. With that evidence in mind, Smith formulates the following proposition: the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket. However, what happens is that Smith himself gets the job. Maybe the president of the company changed his mind or had the wrong information from the person doing the hiring. It also happens that Smith forgot about the fact that he had 10 coins in his pocket. So we end up with the following scenario: Smith's proposition that the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket is true; Smith believes that proposition; and Smith is justified in believing it. After all, the president of the company told him Jones was going to get the job, and Smith saw with his own eyes when Jones dropped 10 coins in his pocket. Smith had justified true belief, and yet that did not amount to knowledge.

Gettier's paper started a debate that has been going on for decades. Philosophers have presented new analyses of knowledge in attempts to avoid Gettier cases. One such example is Michael Clark, who argued for a process of justifying a belief based on grounds, until said belief is fully grounded (Clark, 1963). In the Gettier example I gave, Smith hears he will be the one to get the job. On what grounds, Clark would ask, does he believe that? On the grounds that it was the company's president who told him, one might respond. And on what grounds, Clark would continue, does Smith believe this man? On the grounds that he is the final decision-maker for that matter, one might respond, until the the belief is, as Clark says, fully grounded. Following this same process, we could ask ourselves on what grounds does can one ever consider a belief fully grounded, which poses a serious problem for Clark's argument. But we need not go there. Here is a version of a case proposed by Bertrand Russel: a person wants to know what time is it, so she looks at a clock. It is a great, reliable clock that has been with the person's family for generations without ever breaking down. However, unbeknownst to the person, the clock has stopped working at 3 o'clock the day before. But it just so happens that the person looks at the clock exactly 24 hours after it stopped, making it in fact 3 o'clock. This person believes it to be 3 o'clock, which it is. And her belief, it can be argued, is fully grounded: she is

looking directly at a clock that has never stopped working for decades! In cases such as this—and many have been proposed—there are no inferences, no false lemmas. The subject has visual evidence presented directly to their senses. And still, a Gettier case occurs.

Linda Zagzebski presents us with an analysis of the literature around Gettier cases since the original article was published. As long as any proposed analysis of knowledge fits a certain structure, Zagzebski explains, there will always be a Gettier problem to counter it (Zagzebski, 1994). According to Zagzebski, for any analysis that assumes knowledge is true belief plus something else, like justice, reliability, or grounding, as we have seen in Clark, it will always be possible to build a Gettier case against it—as long, she explains, as whatever is added to true belief does not guarantee truth. Strengthening the notion of justifiability, for instance, is something that has been proposed by epistemologists. The upside of doing that is that when justification becomes error-proof, we may even get rid of the truth component in the analysis—a belief perfectly justified is necessarily true. The issue is that by doing this, we arrive at a place where little (if anything at all) can be considered knowledge. A perfect justification for a belief is extremely hard, if not impossible to get to. And that is not a situation epistemologists want to find themselves in. So how else can we try to avoid proposing analyses that are vulnerable to Gettier cases?

Here is how, according to Zagzebski, Gettier cases are structured.

1. There is a situation where a subject justifiably (or reliably, or on good grounds, etc.) believes in something.
2. Due to a strike of bad luck, it turns out the proposition the subject believed in was false
3. Due to a strike of good luck, the subject's belief turns out to be true.

As long as an analysis of knowledge falls within the constraints explained by Zagzebski (justification not guaranteeing truth), it will always be possible to use this

formula to build a Gettier case against it. Based on this conclusion, Zagzebski and others have written extensively on the subject of virtue epistemology, whose proponents argue is a way to escape Gettier problems, and which is currently one of the most interesting approaches to knowledge.

The search for different perspectives on epistemology, and the quest to define knowledge is valuable not just for philosophers, but for anyone interested in living a better life. Aristotle said neither pleasure, nor honor, nor virtue is equivalent to happiness (Aristotle, 350 BCE). Happiness, he claimed, is the most complete good — an end that is always chosen because of itself, and never as a means to a greater one. Most people, according to Aristotle, equate happiness to pleasure. But that, he believed, leads to passive, undignified lives, where one is satisfied with whatever sense or perception is made available to them. Honor, Aristotle explains, is superficial. It doesn't come from within us, but from the opinions of others—and therefore can be easily taken away from us. Virtue seems to be closer to happiness, but still not equal to it, he explains. To merely possess virtue(s) still means living a passive life. One must not just possess but use them. The lives of humans, Aristotle claims, should go beyond all that. Its function should be the “activity of the soul according to reason”. Striving for knowledge, I believe Aristotle would agree, is an important component of that. Recent times, unfortunately, have presented us with what I submit is a much more urgent epistemological question, one to which I shall now turn.

II

As previously mentioned, Gettier claimed in his seminal paper that a person can be justified in believing a false proposition. This is not only true but has, in current times, become commonplace.

In “What Is Enlightenment”, Immanuel Kant explains that to be enlightened is to be able to think for oneself and to do so (Kant, 1784). To have enlightened individuals freely and publicly expose ideas that compete amongst themselves under the eyes of

enlightened rulers, who in their turn allow debate to run freely, and let the better ideas replace current ones is, according to Kant, the ideal process to improve societies. The abilities to think for oneself, and to speak freely are key tenets in Kant's framework for progress. More than 200 years later, Kant's definition of what it means to be enlightened still stands. However, the reasons he pointed out as to why so many people remain unenlightened throughout their lives—laziness, and lack of courage—beg for questioning, especially in light of epistemic changes that have happened since Kant wrote his essay. According to Kant, enlightenment is a person's release from a self-incurred tutelage. By tutelage, he means one's inability to make use of their understanding without the direction of another person. In other words, an inability to think for oneself. This inability, Kant affirms, comes primarily from individuals themselves. He believed we're all capable of reason, but that we often lack the resolution or the courage to use it.

Kant was right in his belief that the path to enlightenment can be difficult, and that remaining unenlightened often offers a more comfortable alternative. Where Kant was wrong, I believe, was in essentially blaming individuals themselves for not wanting to be enlightened. Despite acknowledging that it would be possible for someone to not be enlightened due to external constraints, he portrayed that as a minor reason. In today's landscape, it is possible to say that this ratio has changed considerably. Of course, many people are still unenlightened due to laziness, lack of courage, or simply because it is more comfortable to be so. But external factors now play a much more significant and insidious role in the unenlightenment of the masses.

In "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles", C. Thi Nguyen explains the difference between these two phenomena, which are often conflated (Nguyen, 2020). Epistemic bubbles, Nguyen says, are epistemic structures where certain pieces of information, opinions, and points of view are excluded through omission. On social media, the fact that we often interact with like-minded friends, combined with algorithms that serve us content we're more likely to enjoy turn our feeds into sources of biased information. However, Nguyen points out, since epistemic bubbles simply

omit information, any individual inside one of those bubbles can break away from them simply by being exposed to outside information. Once in contact with this new information, they can compare arguments and make up their minds about a particular subject. Echo chambers, on the other hand, are a much more noxious phenomenon. In echo chambers, outside information is not only omitted but also actively discredited. Dominant voices within an echo chamber will constantly work to ensure any opinion contrary to theirs is qualified as lies, conspiracy theories, and so forth. One particularly insidious way this happens, Nguyen explains, is through preemptively undermining outside voices. This is done by predicting how someone outside the echo chamber might attack its dominant ideas and letting echo chamber members know in advance how their beliefs will be attacked. By encountering criticism of their beliefs that matches what they were told they would get coming from those on the outside, echo chamber members end up reinforcing their false beliefs, instead of questioning them. Everyone who criticizes our beliefs, echo chamber members believe, must be doing so with ulterior motives. Through this process, Nguyen says, echo chambers become such airtight epistemic structures that someone within them can be completely mistaken in their beliefs, despite following good epistemic practices. In an echo chamber, one can find oneself in a situation where they are using their own reason and yet not thinking for themselves. What makes someone think for themselves, however, is the ability to analyze information critically, and to identify inconsistencies, fallacies, and contradictions. Thinking for oneself requires knowledge of logic, and an ability to observe, analyze, and synthesize information. These skills, unfortunately, are not universally taught, not even in universities, let alone in schools. Besides this, the lives of average citizens today are so busy and flooded with information that filtering and analyzing every issue from every angle becomes a very difficult task. With the rise of social media, this type of behavior has proliferated on an unprecedented scale, which leads to more and more extreme points of view, and alarming levels of sectarianism. This sort of discourse, it must be reminded, happens not just on fringe platforms, but on platforms whose existence is funded by advertising money paid for by some of the world's biggest corporations. Meta Platforms, which owns Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp, has reported revenues of 27.71 billion dollars in the third quarter of 2022

alone. This money comes mostly from ads that run on their platforms. The more time people spend using Meta's products, the more ads they will likely see, and the more stuff they will likely buy. It is in Meta's (and all other social networks) best interest to keep people's eyes riveted to the screen for as long as possible, and the existence of echo chambers helps them achieve that. Misleading content, violence-inciting, democracy-threatening, and so forth is allowed to run on these media platforms, which often claim they cannot take them down because that would violate their user's right to free speech.

To add to an already complicated predicament, recent scientific research in psychology shows that adhering to untrue beliefs might be rational from an evolutionary perspective. Michael Barlev and Steven Neuberg argue that, besides the aforementioned information ecosystem, there is another way to explain irrational beliefs —namely outwardly focused psychological systems adapted to get individuals to 1) rise in prestige, 2) signal group commitment, 3) disparage rivals in the eyes of others, and 4) facilitate collective action towards shared goals (Barlev and Neuberg, 2022). Barlev and Neuberg give a detailed account of how each of these 4 factors play out, but in sum:

1. Our brains have evolved in such a way that providing information to a group confers prestige to the provider. At first look, true information is what does do that, but in cases where the person providing information is already trusted, and the information is difficult to disconfirm, false information will raise the provider's profile as well. Justifying a (false) belief the group already has, especially if the belief is contested by group outsiders, can also bring prestige to the person providing the information.
2. Showing commitment and loyalty to a group is a trait that has evolved with humans. Often people will agree with something they might find wrong or say they believe something they might find false to not go against the group they belong to. Here I add an example: think of how politics in America work today. In

the past, there used to be a crossover between Republican and Democrat politicians on votes for certain bills. Today, most of the voting is divided across party lines. Even if a politician disagrees with how their party is voting, they won't vote against that due to the risk of being seen as a traitor by their constituency.

3. In times of conflict, humans evolved to try to form a large network of allies. One way to earn trust inside a group is to disparage outsiders. Ask yourself how common ad hominem attacks have become in current discourse. Saying the "Other" is bad makes one look good to their group.
4. As a social species, we have survived by being able to rally groups towards certain collective goals. One prominent way this happens is through collective outrage. How often do we see groups outraged at others' sexual behavior, at their lack of work ethics, or their feeble morality, and so forth? Now think back to how much outrage is spread through social media, and how it keeps people engaged to their mobile devices.

If we take Barlev and Neuberg's account seriously, it seems that it is in human nature to develop, nurture, and spread irrational beliefs around.

Now combine this with journalist Ryan Holiday's description of the dynamics of online journalism (Holiday, 2012). For years, Holiday worked as a PR agent for brands and celebrities, working alongside online journalists to get publicity for his clients. Two themes in Holiday's book are key for us to understand how the dynamics of online journalism combined also contribute to the existence of the epistemic environments described by Nguyen. First, there's the way advertising works in digital media. Unlike newspapers or television, for instance, online news outlets can gather, in real-time, the number of views a certain article gets. The more people view an article, the more money can be charged to companies who want to advertise their products on that page. There is a need, then, for journalists to write about things that will get as many clicks on their articles as possible, which creates an incentive for them to search for

sensationalist stories, and to write them in ways that bring out strong emotions in their readers, so they will click, share, comment, and so forth. On average, balanced stories filled with nuance and deep investigative journalism will not get as many clicks as an explosive headline or some big piece of gossip. The second thing, Holiday explains, is that online journalism is not held to the same standards as their print or TV counterparts. Even blogs for big-name newspapers have their own editors, writers, etc, and what they publish is not put through the same criteria for fact-checking, for instance. There is, according to Holiday, a notion that online news is more ephemeral, and therefore doesn't need the same care. If wrong information is published, the article can be corrected, or even deleted. The problem, however, is that once someone reads an article online, it is very unlikely they will ever come back to it a few days later to see if anything has changed. The result is we now have a system that calls for polarized, emotionally charged news, which goes through sub-standard processes of editing and fact-checking dominating the feeds of billions of people around the world.

III

Is there a way out of such a complicated situation? To any person capable of critical thinking, looking around and seeing how most people consume and process information, it might seem this predicament is inescapable. A solution for this, I submit, must encompass institutional changes. Passing laws to reign in social media, and forcing them to bear more responsibility for what is published on people's feeds is one example of what could be done. A new educational system, where teaching is focused on teaching students to think for themselves, as opposed to solely preparing them for the job market is another. There are, on the other hand, things we can do as individuals. I would like to end this essay by mentioning two of them.

To this day, the sophists carry a bad reputation. A search for the word "sophistry" on Google gives the following result: "the use of clever but false arguments, especially with the intention of deceiving." Originally, however, as Bertrand Russell explains, the word "sophist" meant what we now mean by "professor" (Russell, 1946).

What these professors taught in ancient Athens, Russel explains, was not accessible to the general population, but only to the elites, who often used the skills they learned to achieve what they wanted, especially in the city's courts. This connection with law courts, Russel says, helped give sophists a bad reputation amongst the popular classes. Plato too vilified and caricatured them, he says. But the content of his writings, Russel urges, is not how we should judge sophist philosophers. Protagoras, arguably the most prominent of the sophists, Russel tells us, is famous for his skepticism. "Man is the measure of all things", he wrote, meaning that when two people differ, there is no objective truth in virtue that could make one right and the other wrong. The sophists, Russel elaborates, taught the art of arguing, and passed on to their pupils as much knowledge as possible to support them in their arguing. According to Russel, Sophists were despised by their rival philosophers due to their intellectual merit. Sure, they were able to argue for anything. But by being able to argue for anything, with no end goal in mind, is exactly how one gets closer to the truth, says Russel. When one does not know or wants to believe one knows the truth in advance of searching for it, is how one can pursue it wholeheartedly. Sophists, he explains, were prepared to follow an argument wherever it took them, with no preconceptions. In light of what we saw about how current environments and human nature can set us on a pre-determined epistemic path, where one believes what one wants to believe, or where one steers herself to believing what her group believes because it benefits her, thinking like a sophist might be the way to free oneself from her epistemic chains. It is often the case that the search for the truth will not make one look more virtuous, just, or popular. And that is a trade-off one must be willing to make. This, of course, has never been easy and is probably harder today. Going against one's group could have costs most people are not willing to pay. Saying things that might not be politically correct, even though they are true might turn one into a pariah. The search for knowledge certainly requires virtues that not all of us possess. But perhaps what it takes is a few more people to start doing it, therefore giving others an example. Perhaps it also takes us to be more tolerant of those with different opinions, so they feel they can speak their mind without fear of retribution. John Stuart Mill wrote:

“He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.”

And Kant, as we have seen, wrote:

“Have the courage to use your own reason.”

It’s of the utmost urgency, I believe, for us to listen to both of them.

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