

Critique of Nozick's *Conditions for Knowledge*

I. Introduction

One of the most debated topics in philosophy, is the epistemological idea of a standard definition of knowledge, that is, a specific set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. For centuries, it was widely accepted in the field of philosophy that justified true belief (“JTB”) was sufficient for knowledge. More specifically, justification, truth, and belief being the three conditions that grant a subject with knowledge. The theory held that for a subject S to know that P, S had to believe that P, be justified in believing that P, and P had to in fact be true. This “tripartite analysis of knowledge”, suffered its first attack by Edmund Gettier, an American philosopher and Professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who in his short piece *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* (1963), undermined the account by providing cases in which a subject, S, had JTB yet it could not be safely said that S had knowledge. Furthermore, these cases displayed instances where a subject, S, had acquired knowledge via luck. With this problem at hand, several epistemologists became determined to revise, and provide additional conditions for the JTB account, in an attempt to formulate a criterion of knowledge that would deny any Gettier-type cases as being instances of knowledge.

II. Statement of an Account of Knowledge

One of the philosophers who set out to provide a “Gettier-proof” account of knowledge was Robert Nozick, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, best known for his influential contributions to philosophy in the fields of epistemology and metaphysics. In his essay, *Conditions for Knowledge* (1981), Nozick, set out to derive additional, necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, so that any case failing to satisfy at least one of them would not be an instance of knowledge, and any case satisfying all of them would be an instance of knowledge. By the end of his work, Nozick had generated four total conditions for knowledge, which after being tested by Gettier cases of knowledge via luck, seemed to have solved the famous Gettier problem and sufficed as a stable account of knowledge. Nozick’s claim regarding this new account is as follows; “We would like each condition to be necessary for knowledge, so any case that fails to satisfy it will not be an instance of knowledge. Furthermore, we would like the conditions to be jointly sufficient for knowledge, so any case that satisfies all of them will be an instance of knowledge”. As I will later demonstrate however, this account of knowledge and more precisely, Nozick’s claim regarding it, is a rather weak one, as despite being necessary for knowledge, it fails to be sufficient. In this essay, I shall outline Nozick's account of knowledge

and means of deriving it, as well as argue against his claim by presenting a case in which his conditions fail to satisfy as sufficient for knowledge.

III. Nozick's Argument for an Account of Knowledge

Nozick begins his piece by establishing his goal to formulate further conditions to go alongside (1) and (2), two of the three conditions for JTB:

- (1) P is true;
- (2) S believes that P.

He determines that to successfully discredit Gettier cases as instances of knowledge, that causality must play a role in this new account. Further, that by using subjunctive conditionals and the metaphysical idea of "possible worlds", this account of knowledge will eliminate luck-derived instances of knowledge, examining close-by possible worlds in which P holds true and S still believes that P. He first derives the third condition for this account, also known as the *variation condition* (3), which reads as follows:

- (3) If P weren't true, then S wouldn't believe that P.

This condition easily undermines Gettier cases that grant a subject with knowledge, such as the following:

"Two other people are in my office and I am justified on the basis of much evidence in believing the first owns a Ford car; though he (now) does not, the second person (a stranger to me) owns one. I believe truly and justifiably that someone (or other) in my office owns a Ford car".

In this case, the subject has JTB, yet does not have knowledge. By applying (3), the case no longer satisfies all conditions, that is, if no one in the subject's office owned a Ford car (namely, the stranger), they still would believe that the first person owns a Ford (and he does not). Therefore, this case can safely be discarded as an instance of knowledge. As Nozick states, "the subjunctive condition is powerful and intuitive, not so easy to satisfy, yet not so powerful as to rule out everything as an instance of knowledge". However, he determines that a fourth condition must be incorporated into the account, as having (3) on its own is not enough to exclude the following case as an instance of knowledge:

"Someone floating in a tank oblivious to everything around him is given (by direct electrical and chemical stimulation of the brain) the belief that he is floating in a tank with his brain being stimulated".

In this case, despite the fact that the subject is in fact floating in a tank (satisfies condition 1), believes this to be true (satisfies condition 2), and the fact that if he weren't in the tank, he wouldn't believe he was (satisfies condition 3), this is still clearly not an instance of knowledge. Nozick claims that the subject in the tank does not know he is there, because his belief is not sensitive to the truth in that the operators of the tank could have produced any belief, including the false belief that he wasn't in the tank. Further, he states that (3) only depicts half of the story about how the subject's belief is sensitive to the truth-value of P, that is, it displays how his belief is sensitive to P's falsity, but not to P's truth. For this reason, Nozick derives the fourth condition for his account of knowledge, to convey what the subject's belief state would be if P were true, as opposed to if P were false. This condition, also known as the *adherence condition* (4), reads as follows:

(4) If P were true, then S would believe that P.

The case mentioned does not satisfy (4) on the grounds that if P were true, namely if the subject were in the tank in nearby possible worlds almost identical to the actual world, it is not guaranteed that he would believe it, as it is just as likely that the operators of the tank could have produced any other belief. Therefore, this case can be disregarded as an instance of knowledge under the four conditions above. Having derived these two additional conditions for knowledge, Nozick makes one final revision before establishing his final account. To eliminate the possibility that the method by which a subject, S, comes to believe a proposition, P, be changed depending on the truth/falsehood of P, thus leading them to mistakenly believe P or not P, he establishes that the conditions must be restated in a way that the method(s) of arriving at a belief, P, remains consistent. Consequently, his final account of knowledge reads as follows:

- (1) P is true;
- (2) S believes, via method M, that P;
- (3) If P weren't true and S were to use M to arrive at P, then S wouldn't believe, via M, that P;
- (4) If P were true and S were to use M to arrive at P, then S would believe, via M, that P.

VI. Objection to Nozick's Argument for an Account of Knowledge

Nozick's original claim regarding this account is that the conditions above are necessary and sufficient for knowledge. If these conditions were in fact necessary and sufficient for knowledge, as mentioned previously, that would mean that any case failing to satisfy at least one of them would not be an instance of knowledge, and any case satisfying all of them would be an instance of knowledge. I shall present a case however, that fails to abide by this standard, proving that Nozick's account is not in fact sufficient for knowledge. Consider the following:

“Sally, a woman in Mike’s office, owns a Ford. Mike sees Jake, another member of his office who loves Fords and insists on driving his coworkers cars, driving this car, and forms the belief that someone in his office owns a Ford, not knowing the owner of the Ford is in fact Sally”.

This case satisfies conditions (1) and (2), in that someone in Mike’s office does own a Ford, and he believes it via observing Jake drive the car. Further, the case satisfies condition (3), in that if someone in his office didn’t own a Ford, he wouldn’t see Jake driving it and therefore not form the belief that someone in his office owns a Ford via this method. Similarly, the case satisfies condition (4), in that if someone in his office did own a Ford, he would (in nearby possible worlds) see Jake driving it, and hence still form the belief that someone in his office owns a Ford via the same method. Satisfying all four conditions would indicate that Mike has knowledge, yet he does not, as his belief is still not sensitive to the fact that Sally is in fact the one that owns a Ford. Due to the fact that Mike believes that someone in his office owns a Ford on the basis of observing Jake (and not Sally) drive the car, it cannot be safely said that he really knows that someone in his office owns a Ford. For this reason, Nozick’s claim that his four conditions are necessary and sufficient for knowledge does not hold.

V. Conclusion

Nozick’s account of knowledge, although far more triumphant in the elimination of Gettier cases as instances of knowledge than the previous JTB theory, still does not serve as a credible criterion of knowledge. His four conditions, despite being successful in ruling out most Gettier cases, are not both necessary and sufficient as they fail to rule out every and all Gettier-like cases, as shown by the example above. Although these conditions may be necessary for knowledge, that is, they must be satisfied in order to have knowledge, they are not sufficient, meaning that they do not collectively guarantee knowledge when all are satisfied. Specifically, they do not rightfully classify all cases that satisfy them as instances of knowledge. A set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge would perhaps require different, or additional conditions to rule out cases like the one presented above. However, such an account has not yet been formulated, making this one of the most debated topics in epistemology and philosophy to this day.

References:

1. Gettier, Edmund. *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, 1963.
2. Nozick, Robert. *Conditions for Knowledge*, 1981.