

THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The problem of knowledge lies in being able to distinguish “opinion” from “knowledge”. Thus, we require a clear definition of “opinion” and “knowledge” to be able to mark off the one from the other, and so resolve the problem. To this end, this paper in search of an accurate definition of knowledge, examines Plato’s inquiry into the subject in his book: The Theaetetus, but ends up considering “true belief with an explanation”. Plato finally rejects this definition which some philosophers consider as good as any that can be offered as a definition. The paper, subsequently considers A.J. Ayer’s own account of knowledge and the critical view of Gettier’s counterexamples to demonstrate that the problem of knowledge is indeed a difficult one.

Introduction

The question of knowledge is an all-important philosophical question; central to epistemology and one that has plagued philosophers ever since the time of Plato in ancient Greece. Epistemologists have the singular task of investigating such general questions as: ‘what constitutes the essential core of human knowledge?’; ‘what are the sources or origins of such knowledge?’; ‘does all human knowledge originate in sensation or does some of it originates independently of sense experience?’ In other words, the questions: ‘how do we know anything at all?’; ‘can we really have knowledge of anything?’; ‘what is the scope or limits of human knowledge?’ are all very significant questions in epistemology. These are some of the questions about the nature, sources, and extent of human knowledge that concern and motivate epistemology, - the theory or philosophy of knowledge. Our main concern in this discussion, however, is to look into Plato’s investigation into what constitutes knowledge and thereafter turn a brief attention to A.J. Ayer’s similar definition of what knowledge is all about. But first, let us begin with some reflections on why there is a philosophical problem related to knowledge.

I

Opinion and knowledge:

Rene Descartes was one of the first modern philosophers to realize that there was a philosophical problem related to knowledge. He began his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with this remark that many of the things which he accepted as a child to be true, turned out to be false. This issue led Descartes to consider rejecting all his former opinions on the grounds that they too might be false. According to him, "reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt." [Rene Descartes: 1986, p.12]¹. It should be noted that in this passage, Descartes' use of the words "certain" and "indubitable" clearly has some direct reference to knowledge. However, his main point is that much of what we take to be true, certain, or known are often quite uncertain, incorrect or really false. He talks of having many opinions, but most of these opinions may not be genuine knowledge. Knowledge is what is required and not merely opinion. Thus, in order to understand what knowledge is, we must be able to differentiate it from opinion. But how do we distinguish the nature of knowledge from that of opinion? What is knowledge? In ancient times, even Plato had great difficulty in determining the true nature of what constitutes knowledge. Now, before turning to Plato's inquiry into knowledge, let us see some common assumptions that are paramount in the minds of some philosophers when the question: "what is knowledge?" is raised and considered.

ii

Some common assumptions connected to the question of knowledge:

Like Descartes, when we are faced with doubt concerning what we thought we knew, we begin to wonder whether there is indeed anything we can say we know. Can we really know anything? Can we say, for instance, that we can know the nature of the world around us, or is such knowledge not possible? To be able to answer such questions, we need to understand what knowledge means. An investigation into knowledge will reveal that there are certain common assumptions that are often associated with such an inquiry. Thus, the question "what is knowledge?" is often associated, in the first instance, with the essentialist's assumption. The essentialist often assumes that everything has its essence or a set of essential characteristics that make it what it is. Hence, for the

essentialist, all the cases of knowledge have some common essential features that make them cases of knowledge. Thus, when an epistemologist undertakes to ascertain what is meant by knowledge, he firstly tries to determine what counts as the essence or the essential characteristics of any case of knowledge. The idea here is that all cases of knowledge display this common essential feature.

The second common assumption is that all cases of knowledge are universal in character. Hence, most philosophers usually assume that whatever could count as knowledge must be seen to be universal and objective. Furthermore, to be “objective” in this sense means that, that which is objective exists in the world independently of human perception, cultures, and conventions. On this note too, knowledge is regarded as something objective, not subject or relative to human manipulations, nor restricted to particular cultures and conventions. For instance, that “all the points on a circle are equidistant from its center” or that the “earth goes round the sun”, are instances of universal and objective knowledge, not limited to particular persons’ perception or indeed any particular cultural belief or convention.

Many philosophers also make a third assumption when they tackle problems of knowledge. They often assume that some knowledge are more basic or fundamental, and therefore more relevant than others. Hence, for these philosophers, the more basic and relevant aspect of knowledge, thus acts as a foundation for the rest of knowledge. This assumption is called foundationalism, that is, the idea that there are ultimate foundations or grounds for knowledge, truth, goodness, and so forth. This entails that not all the statements, propositions or pieces of knowledge associated with the foundational aspect are equally relevant or on the same footing. That finally means that some aspects of knowledge are more basic and therefore form the foundation upon which all other aspects of knowledge find their support. There is thus a hierarchy of knowledge, with the crucial foundation providing the support upon which the rest of the hierarchies have their base. Descartes was one of the first modern philosophers to make this assumption that some knowledge could serve as a foundation upon which other pieces of knowledge could be established. Thus, for example, at the beginning of his first Meditations, he remarked that he realized that “it was necessary, once in the course of [his] life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundation” if he was to establish anything at all in the sciences that was to be stable and likely to endure [Descartes: 1986, p.12]. Descartes anchored his philosophical foundations on the

most basic “clear and distinct” ideas. And it is on these basic foundational ideas that he built a hierarchy of other clear and distinct ideas. Thus, on the basis of this foundational knowledge, he aimed at gaining as much knowledge as possible about the self, God and the world.

III

Plato’s inquiry into knowledge:

Plato was one of the first philosophers in ancient times to raise the epistemological question: “What is knowledge?” He took great pains to establish the fact that there is a big difference between having an opinion of something and knowing it. An opinion may be defined as a belief or conclusion held with confidence to be true or correct. Plato was never satisfied with opinions; since they were things merely believed to be true or correct, but not really things that we know for certain. Knowledge was Plato’s objective and in order to arrive at that knowledge he inquired to understand what knowledge is. In this section, we are going to follow his inquiry, in the *Theaetetus*, to see the three solutions he proffered concerning knowledge, but which he later rejected and abandoned. After that we will turn to A.J. Ayer to see the solution which he accepted with regard to what knowledge is all about.

Plato’s discussions of knowledge can be found in three of his dialogues, comprising: *The Republic*; *The Meno*; and *The Theaetetus*. *The Theaetetus* was solely devoted to knowledge and is concerned with answering the question: “What is Knowledge?” In this dialogue, Plato appears to have endorsed all the three assumptions mentioned above which philosophers often associate with knowledge. He believes that knowledge has an essence or a set of essential characteristics that make it to be a case of knowledge. All cases of knowledge, for Plato, seem to have these common essential features which make them to be cases of knowledge. Plato also believes that most of what people took to be knowledge are often merely opinions. For Plato, knowledge is something objective, publicly existing in the world as it were, independently of human perception. Plato also seems to have endorsed the idea, of a foundation of basic knowledge, since for him; knowledge of the “forms” is the foundation for all other knowledge of the external world.

[1] Knowledge as Perception:

The Theaetetus opens with a dialogue ensuing between Socrates and Theaetetus. Socrates asks Theaetetus to give a definition for “Knowledge”. Theaetetus defines knowledge as perception, for according to him. “...he who knows perceives what he knows, and, as far as I can see at present, knowledge is perception” [Plato: 1961, *Theaetetus*, 151, p.517]². This definition appears a bit ridiculous, but it is not an unreasonable answer. If I were to ask my wife “How do you know that my handset is under my pillow?” She might answer. “I saw it there”. In this case seeing my handset under the pillow, she knows that it is there. Thus, Theaetetus on this ground is asserting that perceiving [i.e. seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling] something is to know that thing to be the case.

Socrates on examination linked Theaetetus’ answer with Protagoras’ famous saying that “man is the measure of all things”. Protagoras is here taken as claiming that whatever an individual perceives is what he knows. This doctrine gives “knowledge” a subjective character, for it all depends on the subject or the individual. Thus, two persons can know different or contradictory things about the same thing at the same time. The same water may appear cold to me, and to you, may seem warm. You also can know different things about the same object at various times. When you are sick some kind of food may taste bitter to you, but when you are well, it may taste delicious. Thus, these different perceptions can lead one to claim to know different things about the same object. But Socrates’ main contention about the definition rests squarely on its subjective character. If everyone is an infallible judge of the world as he perceives it, then no one else could judge the exactitude or correctness of the other’s perceptions, not to mention whether or not such perceptions constituted knowledge. Thus, everyone’s opinions would constitute knowledge and would therefore be true. This would contradict the general view that opinions sometimes may turn out to be false. It would also contradict the obvious fact that some individuals have knowledge more than others. On Protagoras view, then no one would need to be taught by anyone, since each person’s opinion will equally count as knowledge; and no man’s knowledge would be any better than someone else.

Socrates, of course, displays some counterarguments to show the incorrectness of the assertion that knowledge is perception. Applying the essentialist assumption to Theaetetus’ definition of knowledge as perception, Socrates tries to show that all cases of knowledge and only cases of knowledge would have to be

perception. Therefore, if there are some perceptions that are not knowledge that would contradict the definition that knowledge is perception. Socrates then went ahead to demonstrate that there are cases when we can perceive without knowing, like when we hear foreigners speaking their language, but don't understand or know what they are saying; or when we see written letters, say Chinese, which we have not learned [Plato: *Theaetetus*, 163, p.523]. Socrates also shows the incorrectness of the definition of knowledge as perception, by pointing out cases of knowing that does not involve perception. He says, for example, that someone can learn something and knows that he has done so, and can remember that which he has learnt, even when he is no longer in the position to perceive it. Therefore, if we can perceive without knowing or know without perceiving, this would mean that knowledge cannot be perception.

Socrates then makes a distinction between perception and judgment. He admits that each person's perceptions may be true for him, but this is not a sufficient criterion to suppose that the person's judgments are always right. He cites the case of Lawmakers who sometimes promulgate laws which they deem to be fair and expedient, but their judgment may turn out to be incorrect as the law they promulgated may be quite unjust. This is one reason why we consider the judgments of experts [for instance, in matters of health, we consult a physician] to be a better judgment, since not everyone's judgment can count in such matters. In matters of health, the physician's judgment is considered the wiser measure. Socrates, thus having said this, proceeds to discuss the various functions of the sense organs of the body. He observes that each sense organ performs a specific specialized function for which it was designed. He demands to know which faculty or power that discerns not only in sensible objects, but in all things, universal notions and provides knowledge such as being and not-being; mathematical knowledge of odd and even numbers; and other arithmetical conceptions. Theaetetus thus answers that it is the "mind" that furnishes such knowledge by its own power. They both agree and came to the conclusion that the senses only provide sense information, but cannot by themselves lead us to judge or rationalize things. Knowledge, therefore cannot be sense perception, rather knowledge has to do with the judgments we make on the information provided by the senses. It is through this way that the mind discerns the truth and knows what is and what is not.

[2] Knowledge as True Belief: Since his first definition for knowledge has been refuted, Socrates now prompts Theaetetus to provide a second definition. At this stage, they have both arrived at two main conclusions from the first definition, namely, that not all opinions can count as knowledge, for some opinions are likely to be incorrect. This is confirmed by the discovery that Theaetetus' first definition on examination proved to be incorrect. This first definition failed to include the essence of knowledge. Secondly, they both agree that knowledge cannot be mere sense perception, but must include some reasoning, inferences, or judgments deduced from what was given through sense perception [Plato: *Theaetetus*, 186; p.536].

Theaetetus gives his second definition for knowledge by claiming that knowledge is true belief. This answer appears to be an improvement on his first definition, since one cannot be said to know something if what he claims to know is false. One condition of saying of anyone that he knows something is simply that what he claims to know must be true. If it is an object that one claims to know, it must be the case that the object exists and the proposition asserting the claim to knowledge must be true. Thus, Theaetetus takes knowledge to be only those beliefs or assertions that are true. However, Socrates demonstrates that true belief cannot be equated with knowledge. In other words, to be said to know a thing, it is not sufficient that one should believe that which is known or that what is known should be true. Thus, Socrates argues against this identification of knowledge and true belief on the grounds that a jury might believe truly that a defendant is guilty as charged, but not have sufficient grounds to claim knowledge to such an effect [Plato: *Theaetetus*, 201; p.544]. Theaetetus thus agrees, and Socrates concludes that "If true belief in law courts and knowledge are the same, the perfect judge could not have judged rightly without knowledge; and therefore I must infer that they are not the same" [ibid].

[3] Knowledge as True Belief with some Explanation: Theaetetus now makes a distinction by adding something new to his second definition for knowledge as true belief. This new addition is his third definition for knowledge, and it states that knowledge is true belief combined with reason or an explanation. This definition suggests that in order to claim knowledge of anything, one must have an explanation or an account for his true belief.

Socrates tries to consider what an “explanation” might mean in the context of this new definition. There are three choices open for such a consideration. Firstly, an “explanation” might mean giving a verbal expression reflecting what one has in mind. The problem with this meaning is that most people are unable to manifest in words what they think of anything. But merely expressing a true belief that you have into words does not add something new to the idea of true belief. Secondly, an “explanation” might mean giving an account of the elements of the thing one has a true belief in. Thus, if one knows and can enumerate all the component parts of which a thing is composed, this would be sufficient to make true belief really knowledge. A person, for example, who has a true belief of say, a wagon, and can enumerate all its parts, has additional information to his true belief, and so has knowledge of the essence of a wagon.

Socrates, however, maintains that this won't be sufficient and adequate enough. He supports this objection by saying that a person may in his early education learn to write the name “*Theaetetus*” and begins with writing the first syllable in “*Theaetetus*” as “*Th*” and “*e*”; but when prompted to write the name of “*Theodorus*” will begin with writing “*T*” and “*e*”. Such a person then cannot be said to know the first syllables in the two names. Now, assuming he knows the order of the letters in the spelling of “*Theaetetus*”, and can write them out correctly, he has a true belief; knowing the order of letters in the name, may be taken as an explanation, but surely it is not yet knowledge, for it is possible that the person arrived at the spelling of “*Theaetetus*” through guess work. Thus, there is such a thing as true belief combined with an explanation which does not as yet attain to the status of knowledge. Thirdly, an “explanation” might mean the notion of stating how the true belief differs from all other beliefs. This would mean identifying the chief characteristic that distinguishes the true belief from all others. As Socrates puts it, “if you get at the difference and distinguishing characteristic of each thing, then, as many persons affirm, you will get at the definition or explanation of it; but while you lay hold only of the common and not of the characteristic notion, you will only have the definition of those things to which this common quality belongs” [Plato: *Theaetetus*, 208 p. 548]. This would mean that anyone who has a true belief of something can find out the difference which marks it out from other things and thus would know that of which he has only opinion before. In other words, Socrates would have a true belief that this was *Theaetetus*, but if he adds to this the characteristic that differentiates *Theaetetus* from all others, then he would have knowledge and not merely only opinion of *Theaetetus*.

Socrates felt disappointed by this view however; he then rejects the view because he felt that to have had a true belief that this was Theaetetus, he must already have incorporated all his distinguishing marks from all others. The reason is because if his idea of him only reflects the characteristic which he shares with others, then there are no way one can differentiate him from those others. Thus it will be quite impossible to add his distinctness to his true belief which already contains it. On this basis, Socrates rejects also this third view of knowledge as true belief with an explanation. His critical analysis of Theaetetus' definitions for knowledge finally yielded a refutation of all of them. This, of course, is a reflexion of Plato's idea of knowledge as true belief with a reasoned explanation or justified belief, and it remains as good definition of knowledge as any that has ever emerged.

IV

Some common sense view of knowledge:

Now, let us review the above idea of knowledge as true belief with an explanation which Socrates finally rejected as inadequate. The reason for this review is because there is a common sense view of knowledge that is very closely related to the above view which Socrates rejected, but which has come to be accepted by quite a large number of people, including some philosophers. This is the view which claims that knowing something is having a justified belief that what is known is true. To illustrate the point to be made clear here, let us consider the following scenarios: In each case we are going to decide whether it would be correct to say that: "Bayo knows that Fumi's birthday is on the 15th of this month".

- [1] (a) Bayo believes that his friend Fumi's birthday is on the 15th of Sept.
 - (b) Fumi's birthday is actually on the 15th of August.
- [2] (a) Bayo has no opinion about the date of Fumi's birthday.
 - (b) Fumi's birthday is actually today, 15th of August.
- [3] (a) Bayo randomly throws a dart at the calendar to determine which date is Fumi's birthday, and the dart fell on today's date being 15th of August.
 - (b) On the basis of this chance result, Bayo decides that today 15th August is Fumi's birthday.
 - (c) As a matter of Fact, today 15th August is Fumi's birthday.

- [4] (a) Bayo picks up Fumi's National Identity Card and observes that 15th August is Fumi's birthday.
- (b) Bayo has no reason to doubt that the date on Fumi's National Identity Card is incorrect.
- (c) Based on this fact, Bayo believes that today 15th August is Fumi's birthday.
- (d) And it is indeed true that today 15th August is Fumi's birthday.

Now on the basis of the traditional common sense view of knowledge as justified true belief, we can easily notice that in case 1 above: Bayo could not be said to have knowledge, because he has a false belief. There is nothing like false knowledge. We can have a false belief, and construe that as knowledge, but we are mistaken. In case 2: Bayo cannot be said to have knowledge about Fumi's birthday, because he hasn't even the slightest belief about it at all. Case 3 is different somehow, because Bayo believes that today is Fumi's birthday and his belief happens to be true. However, it would be more reasonable to say that Bayo doesn't actually know this, because his belief, though true is not justified. Belief that is based on a lucky guess or as a result of dart throwing appears to fall short of what is required to have knowledge. Indeed most people would agree that this procedure lacks the sort of reason or justification that would support his belief. The sort of method which Bayo used to arrive at his belief in case 3 could easily just as well have led him to a false belief. It is only in case 4, that we see all the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. Bayo has a true belief and an adequate explanation or justification for how he arrived at the knowledge of Fumi's birthday. Some philosophers might disagree about what counts as justification and that is one reason why this type of account would not work for everything we could call knowledge. What we have illustrated in the above example, is referred to as propositional knowledge or knowing that something is the case. In other words, propositional knowledge is knowledge of propositions or knowing that something is the case. It is a different sort of knowledge from "knowing how". Knowing how is different from "knowing that". Thus, our concern here is mainly with propositional knowledge. In the case of knowing someone's birthday, as in case 4, we seem to have arrived at the kind of explanation which Socrates was looking for in the *Theaetetus*. He was looking for an explanation that would demonstrate how the person arrived at his true belief; that would allow us to appraise whether the procedure constitutes an adequate

justification for the claim to know. Of course, different people might have different standards for justification, but in ordinary life, the standard for justification is usually set at a fairly low level. In contrast to ordinary life, for instance, scientists are much more prone to demanding higher standards for justification. Over the years scientific disciplines have developed their own standards for justification. In medical field, for instance, drugs may have to be tested and retested on several hundreds of animals and finally on humans, before the researchers will claim to know that they are reasonably safe and effective for human consumption. Thus, in this way, the scientists accumulate knowledge and even with their high standard, they do accept certain propositions as legitimate instances of knowledge. They accumulate and build their body of knowledge based on certain instances of foundational knowledge. Thus, it is possible to obtain knowledge in scientific circles and these instances of foundational knowledge could serve as justified, true belief.

V

A.J. Ayer's variant account on knowledge as true belief with some explanation:

The late contemporary British philosopher, A.J. Ayer, puts forward a variant account on knowledge that appears to be very close to Plato's definition of knowledge as justified, true belief. Ayer, we must note, is primarily an analyst, concerning himself mainly with analysis of words and statements, and in his book, *The Problem of Knowledge*³, one could discern from his analysis that he accepts the three basic assumptions, namely: the essentialist; the objectivist; and the foundationalist assumptions that Plato seems to have endorsed in the ancient times, as what are usually associated with anything that could count as knowledge.

Ayer displays his endorsement of essentialism when he says that: "Except where a word is patently ambiguous, it is natural for us to assume that the different situations, or types of situation, to which it applies have a distinctive common feature. For otherwise why would we use the same word to refer to them?" [Ayer: 1976, p. 10]. While discussing the conditions under which a statement is considered valid or true, Ayer displays his objectivism when he says that "to be in a position to say that such a statement is valid we must be able to see that it is so, but it is not made valid by our seeing that it is. It is valid in its own right" [Ayer: 1976, p. 22]. Again, while discussing a class of statements immune from doubt, Ayer demonstrates his endorsement of foundationalism, when he says that: "the only way in which any statement of fact can be discovered either to be

true or false is by someone's having some experience, these statements which are supposed, ... to photograph the details of our experiences seem to occupy a privileged position: ... It is their truth or falsehood that provides the test for the validity of all others. For this reason they have sometimes been described as basic statements, or basic propositions" [Ayer: 1976, p. 54]. Such statements apart from being basic, for Ayer, are statements "the recognition of whose truth or falsehood supplies the natural terminus to any process of empirical verification", such statements which are descriptive of the present contents of experiences are selected as the most worthy candidates. The reason why such statements are so distinguished is because they alone are directly and conclusively verifiable; and of all statements which have a descriptive content they alone are not subject to any further tests. Thus, such experiential statements are taken as basic because they are held to be "incorrigible", and they are "incorrigible" in the sense that "one's grounds for accepting them may be perfect" [Ayer: 1976, p.55].

For Ayer, the first requirement of knowledge is that what we claim to know should be "true". But truth by itself is not enough, even when we add to it the further condition that one must be completely "sure" of what one claims to know. The reason according to Ayer is that "it is possible to be completely sure of something which is in fact true, but yet not to know it. The circumstances may be such that one is not entitled to be sure" [Ayer: 1976. p.31]. He illustrates this point with the example of a superstitious man who after inadvertently walking under a ladder, became convinced that some misfortune was about to happen. But it would be incorrect to say that the man knew that some misfortune was about to happen, even if he did suffer some misfortune. "He arrived at his belief by a process of reasoning which would not be generally reliable; so although his prediction came true, it was not a case of knowledge" [Ayer: 1976, p.31].

Like Plato, Ayer asserts a third condition necessary for knowledge, claiming that knowledge depends upon one having the "right" to be sure of what one claims to know. This claim can be upheld and supported by a reference to perception, memory, testimony, historical records, or to scientific laws. Such backing may be either adequate or inadequate for knowledge, depending on the circumstances of the particular case. According to Ayer, "in a given instance, it is possible to decide whether the backing is strong enough to justify a claim to knowledge. But to say in general how strong it has to be would require our drawing up a list of

the conditions under which perception, or memory, or testimony or other forms of evidence are reliable. And this would be a very complicated matter, if indeed it could be done at all" [Ayer: 1976, p.32]. Thus for Ayer, there is no general rule of evidence. We must decide in each particular case whether or not it is proper to say of someone that he knows a thing.

The third condition for knowledge is a very important condition for Ayer, because it is the most complicated. When we say of someone that he knows a thing, we concede to him the "right" to be sure. This "right" to be sure has its basis on justification. Ayer thinks that there are various kinds of justification and in standard cases, these kinds of justification are completely adequate, but there may be some odd cases as well. If, for instance, I were to ask my wife how she knew that my wallet is under my pillow, it would in general be sufficient for her to answer that she saw it there under the pillow; but assuming that she has a bad eyesight and the lights are out, her answer might not be sufficient. Even though on this occasion she was right in saying that she saw it under the pillow, in certain circumstances it might still be said that she did not really know that the wallet was there. What she felt under the pillow might be something else that feels like a wallet. Thus, normal justification in this instance might not be adequate.

Ayer also thinks that there might be some cases in which an abnormal justification must be accepted. If someone were to predict the exact winning number of a lottery and were consistently successful in doing so all the time in a row, we could say that he knew which number would win, even if we could not comprehend how he knows. Ayer finally thinks that though there may be various acceptable ways of justification, we must assess the grounds of each particular case on its own basis. Ayer rounds up his view on knowledge saying: "I conclude then that the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that something is the case are first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one be sure of it, and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure. This right may be earned in various ways; but even if one could give a complete description of them it would be a mistake to try to build it into the definition of knowledge, just as it would be a mistake to try to incorporate our actual standards of goodness into a definition of good" [Ayer: 1976, p.35]. One can thus see that Ayer's first condition is close to Plato's truth condition. The second condition that one be sure is close to Plato's idea of belief or judgment, while the

third condition which is the right to be sure is close to Plato's demand for justification or explanation. This is an undertaken to give an explanation that would satisfy others that we have the right to be sure of what we claimed to know. One can therefore discern that Ayer's account on knowledge is essentially a variant to the definition of knowledge that Plato rejected more than two thousand years ago.

VI

A critical look at the three-condition view of knowledge:

We noted that Plato finally rejected the three-condition view of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. Ayer's account on knowledge appears to have broadened the justification condition and to have made it less cumbersome. Yet in the 1960s the three-condition view of knowledge witnessed a sustained attack, suggesting that all was not quite well with the definition of knowledge as justified, true belief. The first in the series of attacks on this view appeared in 1963, in a celebrated three-page paper entitled: "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"⁴ presented by Edmund Gettier. In this paper, Gettier summarized the three-condition view and subsequently provided two counterexamples, suggesting cases of justified, true beliefs that were not knowledge. He seems to have followed the Platonic idea that if someone has discovered the essence of something, then there should be no cases that do not march the essence. For reasons of space, we will embark on only one of Gettier's counterexamples, using a somewhat similar example.

Now, suppose that you are a reporter for a certain newspaper, sent to interview an out-going Vice-Chancellor of a university. You want to find out from the VC who will succeed him in office. The VC tells you that Prof. Samuel will get the job, and that he has an office on this floor. You conclude therefore, from these two statements, namely: [1] Prof. Samuel will get the job and [2] Prof. Samuel has an office on this floor, that "the man, who will get the job, has an office on this floor". Thus, you have a good reason for your belief that "the man who will get the job, has an office on this floor", and you are justified in believing this based on what you have been told by the VC. However, the Pro-Chancellor, overrules the VC, and Prof. George gets the job, and Prof. George also has an office on the floor. Thus, "the man who will get the job, has an office on the floor", is not only a justified belief, but obviously, a justified, true belief. The man, who eventually got the job, has an office on the floor.

Gettier, however, would want to say that you cannot know that the claim “the man who will get the job, has an office on the floor”, since the man, Prof. George, who got the job, has an office on the floor, but you know nothing of Prof. George; and Prof. Samuel did not get that job. Therefore, although you had a justified, true belief, you did not know anything. Surely, this is a case of justified, true belief that does not amount to a case of knowledge. This serves as a counterexample to the definition of knowledge as justified, true belief. Thus, justified, true belief cannot be the essence or the correct definition of knowledge, because it does not match all the cases of knowledge.

VII

Conclusion:

The problem with this counterexample has everything to do with the justification. The justification for “the man, who will get the job, has an office on this floor” rests on the information provided to the reporter by the VC, namely that “Prof Samuel will get the job and he has an office on this floor”. This justification is inadequate; since it turned out that the information supplied by the VC is wrong. You cannot know the man who will get the job, has an office on this floor, when your claim to know the man is founded on incorrect evidence supplied by the VC. The significant conclusion follows from this that the justification must be perfect or infallible for the claim to be knowledge. The reporter is clearly justified from all reasonable stand point in believing that Prof. Samuel would get the job, since his evidence is supported by what the VC have told him. But alas! The VC was wrong, and the justification was not perfect or infallible, and this precipitated a problem. If, we are looking for perfect or infallible justifications, we may never find any such justifications or indeed any cases of knowledge. On the other hand, if we do accept any reasonable justifications, these may turn out to be wrong, and we may never really come to know what we claim to know. The problem with justification might lead one tending towards a position called skepticism⁵, namely: the view that knowledge cannot be attained or that all claims to knowledge falls short of the criteria for knowledge. In this sense, we take skepticism to imply the claim that justifications are always fallible or imperfect; or that we never can be certain whether or not a justification is perfect or infallible. In other words, there are no justified beliefs that people can accept, and therefore, no knowledge that everyone can be certain of. We leave you to draw your own conclusion. Is there anything you can know? If so, is your justification perfect or infallible?

END NOTES

¹Rene Descartes, [1986], *Meditations of the first Philosophy*, trans., John Cottingham, [Cambridge: C.U.P], p. 12.

²Plato, [1961], *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed., Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, [New York: Bollingen Foundation].

³A.J. Ayer, [1976], *The Problem of knowledge*, [Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, England].

⁴Edmund Gettier, [1963], "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *The Analysis of knowing*, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983]. Pp 121-123.

⁵Skepticism - There are several versions of skepticism. But on the whole skepticism denies that our claims to knowledge or justified belief are legitimate. For instance, we often take it that we have knowledge about the external world around us. A skeptic about the external world would deny that we have any such knowledge. Here, the skeptic is not arguing that we are sometimes mistaken in our judgments about the world, but his arguments involve the much stronger claim that we are systematically mistaken about possessing such knowledge of the world. In addition to having these skeptical doubts, about the external world, we can be skeptical about our having of say, moral knowledge, or religious knowledge. Skepticism can extend even to the justification or rationality of our beliefs.