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Topic 3

"Knowledge is true belief based on argument."   Plato
"Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Edmund Gettier

What is knowledge? When can I really say I know something? And are we even able to really know something?

Plato says: „Knowledge is true belief based in argument." That sounds logical. It seems like he knows what knowledge is.
But does he really? - That's what Gettier asks, when he writes „Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Gettier also gives some examples, that are true justified belief, but still do not really seem to be knowledge. I do not know these examples by heart, but I will try to retell one of them:
A man was driving down a road with his car and saw a sheep on a meadow next to the street. Well, at least he thought it was a sheep. He was quite sure and really believed it was a sheep, because it looked like a sheep and it was there in the green grass, so he could also base his belief on arguments. So he said: „On this meadow, there is a sheep." But actually what the man saw, was a white dog, who just looked like a sheep. So you could say, he was wrong. But what he did not see was that there was a sheep on the meadow standing right behind this white dog, so that one could not see it from the street. So it was true: There was a sheep on that meadow. This man believed that there was a sheep, he could base this belief on arguments and it was actually true. But, did he really know that there was a sheep? Or was he just lucky?
I have heard another example, which is not really from Gettier, but it is similar to his:
You are on a film set, where they shoot a film about a plumber. On the film set, there are lots of fake toilets, but you do not know they are fake. Then you have to go to the toilet, you stand in front of one of the many toilets on the film set, say: „This is a toilet", open it and then enter it. And you are so lucky, that this is the only toilet in the area, that actually is a real toilet standing there for the staff of the movie company. So you strongly believed it was a toilet. You could base this belief on arguments: It looked, like a toilet, you know how toilets look like and so on. And it really was a toilet, so it was true. But did you really KNOW it was a toilet? Or were you just lucky, because you stood in front of the one and only real toilet next to hundreds of fake toilets, where what you said would not have been true?

So Gettier questioned something people were very sure about for more than 2000 years. He questioned if justified true belief is knowledge. He questioned if philosophers and human beings in general knew what knowledge is. And I find that quite interesting. Gettier also did not say: „No, this is not knowledge." He just questioned it. He just asked the readers and all the other philosophers what they think. And I don't know how to answer this question. I mean, it doesn't really seem to be knowledge. It seems to be more luck than knowledge in the examples given. But, if „true belief based on argument" is no longer a definition for knowledge, what else can be a definition? I rally can't find one.

I even see another problem in the definition „true belief based on argument". It is the terminus „true". I mean, how can we really justify something as completely and truly „true"? How and when can a human being living here on earth really say something is surely and proved „true"?
And it seems to me, like we can't. Scientist, for example, can build up a theory and then show through experiments, that this theory works out, but they can not definitely prove that this will work out

everywhere and at any time. I mean , we can truly belief, that it will work out, but for really proving it we would have to do this experiment everywhere and at every time and this is not possible. And for a philosopher it is even a lot more difficult to prove that what he believes is true. He (or she (I leave the gendering out because it is easier for me, but of course women are also meant)) does not even have data or experiments to prove something, but only arguments with the help of which he tries to convince others.

So even if we say, that Plato is right and knowledge is true belief based on argument, we have the problem, that we do not know, what truth is. Or at least I have got this problem. I could now brood over the question „What is truth?" for an endless time. I could cite Pilate, who asked Jesus „What is truth?" and didn't get an answer. I could come from one thing to another, but in the end I know, that i would not come to a real result, just the one that I do not know it. Or, do I really know that I will not know this? Do I really know that I can not know what truth is because I need to know what truth is to know what knowledge is? - I am completely confused.

So it seems like we, or at least I, can not definitely say what knowledge is. But I do not really like the idea that we can not say we know anything because we do not know what knowledge is. If, for example, someone asks me where Spain is, I will not say: „Well, I do not know where it is, because human beings are not really able to truly know something, but I think it is...". I will just say: „It is in Southern Europe." It would just make life too complicated if we just question everything around us and take nothing for sure, even if we think that, when you take it exactly, nothing can be confirmed as really true or as real knowledge.

So we have to distinguish between a perfect definition of knowledge and knowledge as we use it in our everyday life. And this is something every philosopher has to ask himself. If he wants to find perfect never-to-reach solutions and answers to questions or if he wants to think and write about things that are adaptable to the life of people. Maybe he should try to do both of it: To step out of society for a while and look at life from another point of view and try to find perfect solutions and definitions and then adapt them, so that normal people in their everyday life could use and understand them. I do not know if I can consider myself as being a philosopher. I just like to think about things. Maybe this already makes me a philosopher, maybe not. I do not know.

I am also interested in physics. And for a physician it is not that important if a theory is true. It is more important, that it works out, that you can calculate with it and that you can prove it in experiments. I mean, Karl Popper says, if I got him right, that a hypothesis is true, as long as it is not proved as false. But to me this is not real truth, because it is only temporary and in my mind truth should really be everlasting. So many things already have been true for a while, but are not true anymore, because they were proved as being false, so how can we say, they have ever been true? And how can we say about the things that are held true now, that they are really true, when so many things, that were held true turned out to be not true at all? And can we then really say we know all these things, that we think we know?

And Popper's theories also only work out for natural scientific questions. Because those are the ones you can falsify. When it comes to philosophical questions all the falsification stuff doesn't work any longer. Because you can not prove questions like „Who am I? Is there a life after death? What is truth? What is good/bad? What is a happy/good life? Is it okay to kill animals for eating them? Is the world really like we see it? Do we really exist?" and many, many more. Such questions can not be proved as false and even less be proved as true. Here it comes to what we think, what we believe, who's opinion we follow or better, what is our opinion. And here I am quite sure, that we are not able to know an answer to one of these questions. We can think about them and build up our mind, but we can not find an answer that is proved true and valid for everybody. And this fact makes me anxious, a part of my

mind fights against accepting it, but in the end it makes these questions so truly interesting and thrilling and it makes philosophy such a great subject.

Now after writing the essay I am not wiser, than before. I still do not really know what knowledge is. I even got a bit desperate, while writing it, because so few things can be taken for sure. I do not think that Plato is completely right, also due to Gettier and his questions and examples. But I also can not find a definition, which is better than this one or more practicable. If you, the reader, expected such a definition, I have to say that I am sorry. But I still do not think that this essay was written for no reason. I spent interesting 4 hours when writing it and racked my brain over this topic. I don't think the main aim of philosophy is to answer questions and to find solutions. I think it is important to think about things, to ask questions and discuss them together with others. That's what matters in philosophy. And if I made you think at least a bit, I have reached my goal.
I do not know what knowledge is and if I really can say I know something. But I like thinking about it and trying to learn to know, what I can know and what it means to really know something.