Royal Institute of Philosophy

A-Level Philosophy Epistemology Resources

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Although **epistemology** is one of the core areas of philosophy, the term itself only came into existence relatively recently (it was coined by the 19th Century Scottish philosopher, James Frederick Ferrier (1808-64)). Nonetheless, even though the term is quite new, the cluster of philosophical questions that it describes go right back to antiquity, to the birth of philosophy itself.

So what is epistemology? Well, it is essentially the theory of knowledge. Epistemologists are concerned with such questions as ‘What is the nature of knowledge?’, and ‘How is knowledge acquired?’ They are also interested in a range of concepts which are closely related to knowledge, such as truth, rationality, understanding, and wisdom.

Our epistemological focus will be on three general topics. The first, covered in part one, will be the nature of perception and its bearing on perceptual knowledge. The second, covered in part two, will be the definition of knowledge. Finally, the third topic, covered in part three, will be concerned with where our ideas and knowledge come from.

Each part closes with a summary of the points covered, a list of study questions, and an annotated catalogue of further readings (where these are in turn split up in terms of introductory readings, further readings, and free internet resources). At the end there is also a list of general resources in epistemology and a glossary of key terms (you’ll know when a term appears in the glossary, since it will be in **bold** the first time you come across it).
TOPIC 1: PERCEPTION

- Section Headings

Summary

Text.

Study Questions

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Introductory Reading

- Text.

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Knowledge, Truth and Belief

Think of all the things that you know, or at least think you know, right now. You know, for example, that the earth is round and that Paris is the capital of France. You know that you can speak (or at least read) English, and that two plus two is equal to four. You know, presumably, that all bachelors are unmarried men, that it is wrong to hurt people just for fun, that *The Godfather II* is a wonderful film, and that the moon is not made of cheese. And so on.

But what is it that all these cases of knowledge have in common? Think again of the examples just given, which include geographical, linguistic, mathematical, aesthetic, ethical, and scientific knowledge. Given these myriad types of knowledge, what, if anything, ties them all together?

In all the examples of knowledge just given, the type of knowledge in question is what is called **propositional knowledge**, in that it is knowledge of a proposition. A proposition is what is asserted by a sentence which says that something is the case—e.g., that the earth is flat, that bachelors are unmarried men, that two plus two is four, and so on. Propositional knowledge will be our focus here, but we should also recognise from the outset that it is not the only sort of knowledge that we possess.

There is, for example, **ability knowledge**, or *know-how*. Ability knowledge is clearly different from propositional knowledge; I know how to swim, for example, but I do not thereby know a set of propositions about how to swim. Indeed, I’m not altogether sure that I could tell you how to swim, but I do know how to swim nonetheless (and I could prove it by manifesting this ability—by jumping into a swimming pool and doing the breaststroke, say).
Ability knowledge is certainly an important type of knowledge to have. We want lots of know-how, such as to know how to ride a bicycle, to drive a car, or to operate a personal computer. Notice, however, that while only relatively sophisticated creatures like humans possess propositional knowledge, ability knowledge is far more common. An ant might plausibly be said to know how to navigate its terrain, but would we want to say that an ant has propositional knowledge; that there are facts which the ant knows? Could the ant know, for example, that the terrain it is presently crossing is someone’s porch? Intuitively not, and this marks out the importance of propositional knowledge over other types of knowledge like ability knowledge, which is that such knowledge presupposes the sort of relatively sophisticated intellectual abilities possessed by (mature) humans.

Henceforth, when we talk about knowledge, we will have propositional knowledge in mind. Two things that just about every epistemologist agrees on are that a prerequisite for possessing knowledge is that one has a belief in the relevant proposition, and that that belief must be true. So if you know that Paris is the capital of France, then you must believe that this is the case, and your belief must also be true.

Take the truth requirement first. In order to assess this claim, consider what would follow if we dropped this requirement. In particular, is it plausible to suppose that one could know a false proposition? Of course, we often think that we know something and then it turns out that we were wrong, but that’s just to say that we didn’t really know it in the first place. Could we genuinely know a false proposition? Could I know, for example, that the moon is made of cheese, even though it manifestly isn’t? I take it that when we talk of someone having knowledge, we mean to exclude such a possibility. This is because to ascribe knowledge to someone is to credit that person with having got things right, and that means that what we regard that person as knowing had better not be false, but true.

Next, consider the belief requirement. It is sometimes the case that we explicitly contrast belief and knowledge, as when we say things like, ‘I don’t merely believe that he was innocent, I know it’, which might on the face of it be thought to imply that knowledge does not require belief after all. If you think about these sorts of assertions in a little more detail, however, then it becomes clear that the contrast between belief and knowledge is being used here simply to emphasise the fact that one not only believes the proposition in question, but also knows it. In this way, these assertions actually lend support to the claim that knowledge requires belief, rather than undermining it.

As with the truth requirement, we will assess the plausibility of the belief requirement for knowledge by imagining for a moment that it doesn’t hold, which would mean that one could have
knowledge of a proposition, which one did not even believe. Suppose, for example, that someone claimed to have known a quiz answer, even though it was clear from that person’s behaviour at the time that she didn’t believe the proposition in question (perhaps she put forward a different answer to the question, or no answer at all). Clearly we would not agree that this person did have knowledge in this case. Again, the reason for this relates to the fact that to say that someone has knowledge is to credit that person with a certain kind of success. But for it to be your success, then belief in the proposition in question is essential, since otherwise this success is not creditable to you at all.

**Knowledge versus Mere True Belief**

It is often noted that belief *aims* at the truth, in the sense that when we believe a proposition, we believe it to be the case (i.e., to be true). When what we believe is true, then there is a match between what we think is the case and what is the case. We have got things right. If mere true belief suffices for ‘getting things right’, however, then one might wonder as to why epistemologists do not end their quest for an account of knowledge right there and simply hold that knowledge is nothing more than true belief (i.e., ‘getting things right’).

There is in fact a very good reason why epistemologists do not rest content with mere true belief as an account of knowledge, and that is that one can gain true belief entirely by accident, in which case it would be of no credit to you at all that you got things right. Consider Harry, who forms his belief that the horse Lucky Lass will win the next race purely on the basis of the fact that the name of the horse appeals to him. Clearly this is not a good basis on which to form one’s belief about the winner of the next horse race, since whether or not a horse’s name appeals to you has no bearing on its performance.

Suppose, however, that Harry’s belief turns out to be true, in that Lucky Lass *does* win the next race. Is this knowledge? Intuitively not, since it is just a matter of luck that his belief was true in this case. Remember that knowledge involves a kind of success that is creditable to the agent. Crucially, however, successes that are merely down to luck are never credited to the agent.

In order to emphasise this point, think for a moment about successes in another realm, such as archery. Notice that if one genuinely is a skilled archer, then if one tries to hit the bull’s-eye, and the conditions are right (e.g., the wind is not gusting), then one usually *will* hit the bull’s-eye. That’s just what it means to be a skilled archer. The word ‘usually’ is important here, since someone who isn’t a skilled archer might, as it happens, hit the bull’s eye on a particular occasion, but she wouldn’t
usually hit the bull’s-eye in these conditions. Perhaps, for example, she aims her arrow and, by luck, it hits the centre of the target. Does the mere fact that she is successful on this one occasion mean that she is a skilled archer? No, and the reason is that she would not be able to repeat this success. If she tried again, for example, her arrow would in all likelihood sail off into the heavens.

Having knowledge is just like this. Imagine that one’s belief is an arrow, which is aimed at the centre of the target, truth. Hitting the bull’s-eye and forming a true belief suffices for getting things right, since all this means is that one was successful on that occasion. It does not suffice, however, for having knowledge any more than hitting the bull’s-eye purely by chance indicates that you are skilled in archery. To have knowledge, one’s success must genuinely be the result of one’s efforts, rather than merely being by chance. Only then is that success creditable to one. And this means that forming one’s belief in the way that one does ought usually, in those circumstances, to lead to a true belief.

Harry, who forms his true belief that Lucky Lass will win the race simply because he likes the name, is like the person who happens to hit the bull’s-eye, but who is not a skilled archer. Usually, forming one’s belief about whether a horse will win a race simply by considering whether the name of the horse appeals to you will lead you to form a false belief.

Contrast Harry with someone who genuinely knows that Lucky Lass will win the race. Perhaps, for example, this person is a ‘Mr Big’, a gangster who has fixed the race by drugging the other animals so that his horse, Lucky Lass, will win. He knows that the race will be won by Lucky Lass because the way he has formed his belief, by basing it on the special grounds he has for thinking that Lucky Lass cannot lose, would normally lead him to have a true belief. It is not a matter of luck that Mr Big hits the target of truth.

The challenge for epistemologists is thus to explain what needs to be added to mere true belief in order to get knowledge. In particular, epistemologists need to explain what needs to be added to true belief to capture this idea that knowledge, unlike mere true belief, involves a success that is creditable to the agent, where this means, for example, that the agent’s true belief was not simply a matter of luck.

The Classical Account of Knowledge

So it seems that there must be more to knowledge than just true belief. But what could this additional component be? The natural answer to this question, one that is often ascribed to the
ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427-c. 347 BC), is that what is needed is a justification for one’s belief, where this is understood as being in possession of good reasons for thinking that what one believes is true. This proposal is known as the classical account of knowledge. (It also sometimes referred to as the ‘tripartite’—i.e., three-part—account of knowledge).

Consider again the case of Harry, who believes that Lucky Lass will win the race because he likes the name, and Mr. Big, who forms the same belief on the grounds that he has fixed the race. As we noted, although both of these agents believe truly, only Mr. Big intuitively has knowledge of what he believes. The claim that it is justification that marks the difference between knowledge and mere true belief accords with this assessment of our two agents’ beliefs. Mr. Big, after all, has excellent reasons in support of his true belief, since he is aware that the other horses have been drugged and so don’t have a hope of winning (unlike the undrugged Lucky Lass). Harry, in contrast, can’t offer any good reasons in support of his belief. That he happens to like the name of a horse is hardly a good reason for thinking that this horse will win a race!

Plausibly, then, the missing ingredient in our account of knowledge is justification, such that knowledge is justified true belief. Indeed, until relatively recently most epistemologists thought that this theory of knowledge was correct. Unfortunately, as we will now see, the classical account of knowledge cannot be right, even despite its surface plausibility.

The Gettier Problem

The person who demonstrated that the classical account of knowledge is untenable was a philosopher named Edmund Gettier (b. 1927). In a very short article—just two-and-a-half pages in length—he offered a devastating set of counterexamples to the classical account: what are now known as Gettier cases. In essence, what Gettier showed was that you could have a justified true belief and yet still lack knowledge of what you believe because your true belief was ultimately gained via luck in much the same way as Harry’s belief was gained by luck.

We will use a different example from the ones cited by Gettier, though one that has the same general structure. Imagine a man, let’s call him John, who comes downstairs one morning and sees that the time on the grandfather clock in the hall says ‘8.20’. On this basis John comes to believe that it is 8.20 a.m., and this belief is true, since it is 8.20 a.m. Moreover, John’s belief is justified in that it is based on excellent grounds. For example, John usually comes downstairs in the morning about
this time, so he knows that the time is about right. Moreover, this clock has been very reliable at
telling the time for many years and John has no reason to think that it is faulty now. He thus has
good reasons for thinking that the time on the clock is correct.

Suppose, however, that the clock had, unbeknownst to him, stopped 24 hours earlier, so that
John is now forming his justified true belief by looking at a stopped clock. Intuitively, if this were so
then John would lack knowledge even though he has met the conditions laid down by the classical
account of knowledge. After all, that John has a true belief in this case is, ultimately, a matter of luck,
just like Harry’s belief that Lucky Lass would win the 4.20 at Kempton.

If John had come downstairs a moment earlier or a moment later—or if the clock had
stopped at a slightly different time—then he would have formed a false belief about the time by
looking at this clock. Thus we can conclude that knowledge is not simply justified true belief.

There is a general form to all Gettier cases, and once we know this we can use it to construct
an unlimited number of them. To begin with, we need to note that you can have a justified false
belief, since this is crucial to the Gettier cases. For example, suppose you formed a false belief by
looking at a clock that you had no reason for thinking wasn’t working properly but which was, in
fact, and unbeknownst to you, not working properly. This belief would clearly be justified, even
though it is false. With this point in mind, there are three stages to constructing your own Gettier
case.

First, you take an agent who forms her belief in a way that would usually lead her to have a
false belief. In the example above, we took the case of someone looking at a stopped clock in order
to find out the time. Clearly, using a stopped clock to find out the time would usually result in a false
belief.

Second, you add some detail to the example to ensure that the agent’s belief is justified
nonetheless. In the example above, the detail we added was that the agent had no reason for
thinking that the clock wasn’t working properly (the clock is normally reliable, is showing what
appears to be the right time, and so on), thus ensuring that her belief is entirely justified.

Finally, you make the case such that while the way in which the agent formed her belief
would normally have resulted in a justified false belief, in this case it so happened that the belief was
true. In the stopped clock case, stipulating that the stopped clock just happens to be ‘telling’ the
right time does this.

Putting all this together, we can construct an entirely new Gettier case from scratch. As an
example of someone forming a belief in a way that would normally result in a false belief, let’s take
someone who forms her belief that Madonna is across the street by looking at a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Madonna which is advertising her forthcoming tour, and which is posted just across the street. Forming one’s belief about whether someone is across the street by looking at a life-sized cut-out of that person would not normally result in a true belief. Next, we add some detail to the example to ensure that the belief is justified. In this case we can just stipulate that the cut-out is very authentic-looking, and that there is nothing about it which would obviously give away the fact that it is a cardboard cut-out—it does not depict Madonna in an outrageous costume that she wouldn’t plausibly wear on a normal street, for example. The agent’s belief is thus justified. Finally, we make the scenario such that the belief is true. In this case, for instance, all we need to do is stipulate that, as it happens, Madonna is across the street, doing some window-shopping out of view of our agent. Voilà, we have constructed our very own Gettier case!

Responding to the Gettier Problem

There is no easy way to respond to the Gettier cases, and since Gettier’s article back in 1963, a plethora of different theories of knowledge have been developed in order to offer an account of knowledge that is Gettier-proof. Initially, it was thought that all one needed to do to deal with these cases is simply tweak the classical account of knowledge. For instance, one proposal was that in order to have knowledge, one’s true belief must be justified and also not in any way based on false presuppositions, such as, in the case of John just described, the false presupposition that the clock is working and not stopped. There is a pretty devastating problem with this sort of proposal, however, which is that it is difficult to spell out this idea of a ‘presupposition’ such that it is strong enough to deal with Gettier cases and yet not so strong that it prevents us from having most of the knowledge that we think we have.

For example, suppose that John has a sister across town—let’s call her Sally—who is in fact at this moment finding out what the time is by looking at a working clock. Intuitively, Sally does gain knowledge of what the time is by looking at the time on the clock. Notice, however, that Sally may believe all sorts of other related propositions, some of which may be false—for example, she may believe that the clock is regularly maintained, when in fact no one is taking care of it. Is this belief a presupposition of her belief in what the time is? If it is (i.e., if we understand the notion of a ‘presupposition’ liberally) then this false presupposition will prevent her from having knowledge of
the time, even though we would normally think that looking at a reliable working clock is a great way of coming to know what the time is.

Alternatively, suppose we understand the notion of a ‘presupposition’ in a more restrictive way such that this belief isn’t a presupposition of Sally’s belief in the time. The problem now is to explain why John’s false belief that he’s looking at a working clock counts as a presupposition of his belief in the time (and so prevents him from counting as knowing what the time is) if Sally’s false belief that the clock is regularly maintained is not also treated as a presupposition. Why don’t they both lack knowledge of what the time is?

If this problem weren’t bad enough, there is also a second objection to this line of response to the Gettier cases, which is that it is not clear that the agent in a Gettier case need presuppose anything at all. Consider a different Gettier case in this regard, due to Roderick Chisholm (1916-1999). In this example, we have a farmer—let’s call her Gayle—who forms her belief that there is a sheep in the field by looking at a shaggy dog, which happens to look just like a sheep. As it turns out, however, there is a sheep in the field (standing behind the dog), and hence Gayle’s belief is true. Moreover, her belief is also justified because she has great evidence for thinking that there is a sheep in the field (she can see what looks to be a sheep in the field, for example).

Given the immediacy of Gayle’s belief in this case, however, it is hard to see that it really presupposes any further beliefs at all, at least unless we are to understand the notion of a presupposition very liberally. And notice that if we do understand the notion of a presupposition so liberally that Gayle counts as illicitly making a presupposition, the problem then re-emerges of how to account for apparently genuine cases of knowledge, such as that intuitively possessed by Sally.

The dilemma for proponents of this sort of response to the Gettier cases is thus to explain how we should understand the notion of a presupposition broadly enough so that it applies to the Gettier cases while at the same time understanding it narrowly enough so that it doesn’t apply to other non-Gettier cases in which, intuitively, we would regard the agent concerned as having knowledge. In short, we want a response to the problem, which explains why John lacks knowledge in such a way that it doesn’t thereby deprive Sally of knowledge.

Once it was recognised that there was no easy answer to the problem posed to the classical account of knowledge by the Gettier cases, the race was on to find a radically new way of analysing knowledge which was Gettier-proof. One feature that all such accounts share is that they understand the conditions for knowledge such that they demand more in the way of co-operation from the world than simply that the belief in question is true. That is, on the classical account of knowledge
there is one condition which relates to the world—the truth condition—and two conditions that relate to us as agents—the belief and justification conditions. These last two conditions, at least as they are usually understood in any case, don’t demand anything from the world in the sense that they could obtain regardless of how the world is. If I were the victim of an hallucination, for example, then I might have a whole range of wholly deceptive experiences, experiences that, nonetheless, lead me to believe something and, moreover, to justifiably believe it. (For example, if I seem to see that, say, there is a glass in front of me, then this is surely a good, and thus justifying, reason for believing that there is a glass in front of me, even if the appearance of the glass is an illusion.) The moral of the Gettier cases is, however, that you need to demand more from the world than simply that one’s justified belief is true if you are to have knowledge.

In the stopped-clock Gettier case, for example, the problem came about because, although John had excellent grounds for believing what he did, it nevertheless remained that he did not know what he believed because of some oddity in the world—in this case that the normally reliable clock had not only stopped but had stopped in such a way that John still formed a true belief. It thus appears that we need an account of knowledge, which imposes a further requirement on the world over and above the truth of the target belief—that, for example, the agent is, in fact, forming his belief in the right kind of way. But specifying exactly what this requirement involves is far from easy.

[Add some remarks on infallibilism, reliabilism, and virtue epistemology].

Summary

- Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. One of the characteristic questions of epistemology concerns what all the myriad kinds of knowledge we ascribe to ourselves have in common: What is knowledge?
- We can distinguish between knowledge of propositions, or propositional knowledge, and know-how, or ability knowledge. Intuitively, the former demands a greater degree of intellectual sophistication on the part of the knower than the latter.
- In order to have knowledge of a proposition, that proposition must be true, and one must believe it.
Mere true belief does not suffice for knowledge, however, since one can gain mere true belief purely by luck, and yet you cannot gain knowledge purely by luck.

According to the classical (or tripartite) account of knowledge, knowledge is understood as justified true belief, where a justification for one’s belief consists of good reasons for thinking that the belief in question is true.

Gettier cases are cases in which one forms a true justified belief and yet lacks knowledge because the truth of the belief is largely a matter of luck. (The example we gave of this was that of someone forming a true belief about what the time is by looking at a stopped clock, which just so happens to be displaying the right time.) Gettier cases show that the classical account of knowledge in terms of justified true belief is unsustainable.

There is no easy answer to the Gettier cases; no simple way of supplementing the classical account of knowledge so that it can deal with these cases. Instead, a radically new way of understanding knowledge is required, one that demands greater co-operation on the part of the world than simply that the belief in question be true.

Study Questions

1. Give examples of your own of the following types of knowledge:
   - scientific knowledge;
   - geographical knowledge;
   - historical knowledge;
   - religious knowledge.

2. Explain, in your own words, the distinction between ability knowledge and propositional knowledge. Give two examples of each kind of knowledge.

3. Why is mere true belief not sufficient for knowledge? Give an example of your own of a case in which an agent truly believes something, but does not know it.

4. What is the classical account of knowledge? How does the classical account of knowledge explain why a lucky true belief doesn’t count as knowledge?

5. What is a Gettier case, and what do such cases show? Try to formulate a Gettier case of your own.

6. In what way might it be said that the problem with Gettier cases is that they involve a justified true belief which is based on a false presupposition? Explain, with an example, why
one cannot straightforwardly deal with the Gettier cases by advancing a theory of knowledge which demands justified true belief that does not rest on any false presuppositions.

Introductory Further Reading


Advanced Further Reading

- Shope, R. K. (2002). ‘Conditions and Analyses of Knowing’, *The Oxford Handbook to Epistemology,* (ed.) P. K. Moser, pp. 25–70, (Oxford: Oxford University Press). [A comprehensive treatment of the problem posed by Gettier cases and the various contemporary responses to that problem in the literature. The discussion that starts on page 29 is most relevant to this chapter. Note that as this chapter develops it becomes increasingly more demanding].
- Steup, M., Turri, J., & Sosa, E. (eds.) (2013) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology (2nd Edn.),* (Oxford: Blackwell). [See the exchange between Duncan Pritchard and Stephen Hetherington on whether there can be lucky knowledge (§7)].

Free Internet Resources


TOPIC 3:
THE ORIGINS OF CONCEPTS
AND THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

Section Headings

Summary

Text.

Study Questions

Text.

Introductory Reading

Text.

Further Reading

Text.

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Text.
GENERAL RESOURCES

Textbooks


- Bonjour, L., & Sosa, E. (2003) *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Oxford: Blackwell). [It is not quite true to say that this is a textbook, since it in fact features two opposing essays from the main contributors, along with a critique and response from each contributor to the other. Nevertheless, it is an excellent way of getting an overview of some of the key issues in contemporary epistemology].


- Pritchard, D. H. (2015). *What is this Thing Called Knowledge?,* (London: Routledge, 3rd Edn.). [This comprehensive introduction to epistemology presupposes no previous knowledge of philosophy, and so is well-suited for students studying this topic for the first time].


Edited Collections


q Hetherington, S. (ed.) (2012) Epistemology: The Key Thinkers, (London: Continuum). Helpful profiles of some of the main figures in epistemology, going right back to the ancients and extending up to the present day.


q Sosa, E., Kim, J., Fantl, J., & McGrath, M. (eds.) (2008). Epistemology: An Anthology, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd Edn.). [An excellent and well-priced anthology of articles which has recently been updated to include a number of new articles on recent developments in the epistemological literature].

q Steup, M., Turri, J., & Sosa, E. (eds.) (2013). Contemporary Debates in Epistemology, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd Edn.). [An excellent idea: the main figures in the literature offer alternative perspectives on a key issue, and then respond to each other’s articles. The second edition includes several newly-commissioned exchanges, and covers all the core topics in contemporary epistemology. Very up-to-date].
Free Internet Resources

  [The second-best completely free internet encyclopedia of philosophy available. It’s not quite as comprehensive or authoritative as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (see below), but still contains some very good entries on epistemology].

Ability knowledge
This is often referred to as 'know-how', since it involves knowing how to do something, such as ride a bike or swim. It is usually contrasted with propositional knowledge, which is knowledge of a proposition. The two types of knowledge are treated differently because, intuitively at least, one might know how to do something (e.g., swim) without having any relevant propositional knowledge (e.g., without knowing that you can swim, perhaps because you forgot that you could until you fell in the water). See also propositional knowledge.

Classical account of knowledge
According to classical account of knowledge, knowledge is defined as justified true belief. This view is often credited to Plato, and is sometimes referred to as the ‘tripartite’ (i.e., three-part) account of knowledge. See also Gettier cases.

Epistemology
This is the name given for the theory of knowledge. Those who study epistemology—known as epistemologists—are also interested in those notions closely associated with knowledge, such as truth, justification and rationality.

Gettier cases
Gettier cases are scenarios in which an agent has a justified true belief and yet lacks knowledge because it is substantially due to luck that the belief in question is true. Imagine someone who forms her belief about what the time is by looking at a stopped clock that she has every reason for thinking is working. Crucially, however, she happens to look at the clock at the one time in the day when it is showing the right time, and so forms a true belief as a result. Her belief is thus both true and justified, yet it isn’t a case of knowledge since it is just luck that her belief is true given that the clock is not working. Gettier cases show that the classical account of knowledge that analyses knowledge into justified true belief is unsustainable. See also classical account of knowledge.

Proposition
A proposition is what is stated by a declarative sentence. For example, the sentence ‘The cat is on the mat’ states that something is the case; namely, that the cat is on the mat, and this is the proposition expressed by this sentence. Notice that the same proposition will be expressed by an analogue declarative sentence, which is in a different language, such as French, just so long as what is stated by that sentence is the same.

Propositional knowledge
This is knowledge that something (i.e., a proposition) is the case. It is typically contrasted with ability knowledge, or know-how. The two types of knowledge are treated differently because, intuitively at least, one might know how to do something (e.g., swim) without having any relevant propositional knowledge (e.g., without knowing that you can swim, perhaps because you forgot that you could until you fell in the water). See also ability knowledge.