Click on the link above to be taken to the DB; in your group in the corresponding forum, create a new thread answering the instructor's prompts below:

For this assignment, you are presented with a real epistemological puzzle, one that has perplexed philosophers for the last several decades.  NOTE: In order to fulfill this assignment you need to view the PointeCast presentation “The Definition of Knowledge” in Lesson 11.

For about 2000 years, most philosophers have been satisfied with the traditional definition of knowledge given by Plato as “justified true belief” (discussed in the presentation).  However, in 1963, Edmund Gettier, a philosophy instructor at Wayne State University, wrote a three page article that challenged the way philosophers think about what knowledge is by providing a counterexample to the traditional definition.  This challenge has come to be known as "The Gettier Problem."  In a nutshell, Gettier claimed that it was possible to have “justified true belief” about something, and yet it would not be considered knowledge.  In other words, justified true belief might be necessary for knowledge, but it isn’t sufficient for claiming that one really knows something.

Here is an example of a Gettier-type counterexample.  Suppose you have been studying in the library for quite some time and you glance up at the clock to see what time it is, and it reads 2:10 in the afternoon.  You then conclude that it is in fact 2:10pm.  However, unknown to you, that clock happened to stop working at 2:10 several days ago.  But it just so happens that at the moment you glanced up at the clock it actually was, quite coincidently, 2:10 p.m.  Therefore, you formed a belief that it was 2:10pm; the belief was true, and you were justified in believing it was true (you had no reason to doubt the clock’s accuracy).  Therefore, you had a justified true belief.  However, you did not know it was 2:10pm; it was just a coincidence.  (You can read Gettier’s original short article “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” online.)

Several philosophers have attempted to solve "The Gettier Problem."  These solutions have fallen into three general strategies.

(1) Some have decided to keep the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief. They just believe that the Gettier counterexamples don’t qualify as real justification for beliefs.  In other words you don’t know that it is 2:10 because your belief wasn’t really justified.  Justification should guarantee for certain the conclusion and that didn’t happen in the case of the clock in the library.

(2) Some have held to the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief, but added a fourth condition to knowledge: Knowledge is justified true belief + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.  What should fill in the blank?  Several ideas have been suggested but I will just mention two:

(a) Some have said that “the justification itself cannot be false” should be added.  In the clock example, the justification was based on the belief that the clock was giving accurate time.  But this belief was false.  The presence of false belief in the justification makes it inappropriate to justify the conclusion.

(b) Some have suggested that a defeasibility condition needs to be understood as part of the idea of justification.  This condition states that for a belief, P, to be justified, there cannot be a competing true proposition (a “defeater”) the awareness of which would lead one no longer to be justified in believing P. In the clock example, the justification is based on the belief that the clock was telling the time accurately.

However, there was a competing true proposition that said “the clock is broken.”  Had you been aware of this proposition you would not have concluded that it was 2:10 based on looking at the clock.  Therefore you were not justified in reaching the conclusion that it was 2:10 and therefore you did not know it.  It’s important to understand that in this solution you don’t have to actually be aware of the defeater, there just has to be one that if you were aware of it, than you would not be justified.

  3) Some have said that a new definition of knowledge is needed that replaces “justification” with something else.  They agree that knowledge is “true belief,” but what is needed is not “justification” but some other element.  As we will see later in the course (see Wood, Ch 6) this is the strategy used among many reliabilists.  Reliabilists believe that as long as my cognitive faculties (my senses, memories and reasoning abilities) are functioning reliably then I can say I have knowledge.  I don’t have to know they are functioning reliably; they just have to be functioning reliably in order to say I know (just like I don’t have to know how my computer works for it to be working).  Concerning the clock example, reliabilists just say that my cognitive faculties weren’t functioning reliably in this situation.  Are they right?

All of these solutions have their strengths, but they also have problems.  Can you think of what they might be?  For your initial thread, in at least 250 words, select one of these proposed solutions and discuss its strengths and/or weaknesses.  Do you think it works?  Why or why not?  If you need more clarification you can do some outside research.  Just go to Google or some other search engine and type in “Gettier Problem Proposed Solutions.”  You’ll have no trouble finding information - a large amount has been written on this puzzle.

Do not worry about giving a perfect resolution to the problem – the idea is just for you to wrestle with. Treat it like a game or a difficult puzzle you are trying to solve.