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XII—THE DISTINCTION IN KIND BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

MARIA ROSA ANTONGAZZA

Drawing inspiration from a well-attested historical tradition, I propose an account of cognition according to which knowledge is not only prior to belief; it is also, and crucially, not a kind of belief. Believing, in turn, is not some sort of botched knowing, but a mental state fundamentally different from knowing, with its own distinctive and complementary role in our cognitive life. I conclude that the main battle-line in the history of epistemology is drawn between the affirmation of a natural mental state in which there is a contact between ‘mind’ and ‘reality’ (whatever the ontological nature of this ‘reality’) and the rejection of such a natural mental state. For the former position, there is a mental state which is different in kind from belief, and which is constituted by the presence of the object of cognition to the cognitive subject, with no gap between them. For the latter position, all our cognition is belief, and the question becomes how and when belief is permissible.

I

Introduction. If I had to summarize this paper in a few words, I would use two complementary slogans: ‘Knowledge first’, but ‘Give belief its due!’¹

For the past century, epistemological debates have focused on a conception of knowledge as a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. As any student of epistemology will know, after Gettier argued in 1963 that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, scores of philosophers have searched for the elusive condition(s) which can turn true belief into knowledge. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* still informs us that ‘much of epistemology revolves around questions about when and how our beliefs are

¹ ‘Knowledge first’ is the way in which Williamson summarizes his milestone book on knowledge (Williamson 2000, p. v).

justified or qualify as knowledge' (Schwitzgebel 2019). Yet the supposedly 'traditional' analysis of knowledge as true belief plus some other necessary and sufficient conditions continues to run into counter-examples and charges of circularity.

In light of this recurrent failure, the calls for alternative accounts are growing louder. Notably, John Hyman (1999; 2015, esp. pp. 159–90; 2017) opposes the view that knowledge is a species of belief, and proposes an original account of knowledge as the ability to be guided by the facts; and Timothy Williamson, in his groundbreaking *Knowledge and Its Limits* (2000), argues for a new 'knowledge-first epistemology'. Williamson's key manoeuvre is to invert the previously 'standard' relationship: rejecting the twentieth-century orthodoxy that regards belief as conceptually prior to knowledge, Williamson advocates the conceptual priority of knowledge to belief. Knowledge, he argues, can be characterized without reference to belief, while belief can be characterized by reference to knowledge (2000, pp. 4–5). Knowing, Williamson argues, is a state of mind: the most general truth-entailing or 'factive' mental state. On the other hand, 'believing *p* is, roughly, treating *p* as if one knew *p*'. 'Knowledge', he continues, 'sets the standard of appropriateness for belief. ... [T]he further one is from knowing *p*, the less appropriate it is to believe *p*. Knowing is in that sense the best kind of believing. Mere believing is a kind of botched knowing' (Williamson 2000, p. 47). In short, for Williamson, knowing entails believing, but this entailment does not imply that knowledge is analysable in terms of belief. For his part, Hyman argues that belief should be defined in terms of knowledge: 'we can define the belief that *p* as the disposition to act (think, feel) as one *normally* or *generally* would if one knew that *p*' (2017, p. 285). But he rejects the view that the concept of knowledge has a primary or basic role or position in our system of mental and logical concepts.

I propose to push this revolt against post-Gettier epistemology further, in a more radical manner. The first step in doing so is to challenge the crude history of philosophy underlying the entire Gettier paradigm, according to which knowledge has been traditionally conceived of as justified true belief (JTB). A careful survey of the history of epistemology reveals that this allegedly 'standard' or 'traditional' analysis is in fact neither standard nor traditional. On the contrary: it is difficult to find major philosophers for thousands of years who framed the problem of knowledge and belief in these

terms; and what the main historical movements and authors did say about human cognition is most often strikingly at odds with this so-called standard analysis (see Antognazza 2015, pp. 165–72; Dutant 2015; Ayers and Antognazza 2019). In fact, leading representatives of the Western philosophical tradition do not merely reverse the relationship between knowledge and belief: they conceive of knowledge, belief and the relationship between them in a very different way. According to these traditional views, knowing and believing are distinct in kind, in the strong sense that they are mutually exclusive mental states: the same cognitive subject cannot, simultaneously and in the same respect, be in a state of both knowing and believing the same thing. Knowing is not ‘the best kind of believing’; nor is believing to be understood derivatively from knowing.

The view that knowledge and belief are distinct in kind in this strong sense is routinely dismissed in contemporary literature as so obviously implausible as to deserve little or no discussion (see Williamson 2000, p. 42; Alston 1991, pp. 70–1; Pasnau 2017, p. 219). My proposal breaks decisively with this trend by showing that this view is well-attested in the history of epistemology, and provides the basis for an account of cognition that avoids many of the pitfalls discussed in the literature.

I will argue that, according to a persistent traditional strand of thought which should be recovered, there are two fundamentally distinct modes of cognition which can be roughly identified by a contrast between *seeing* and *not-seeing*. A remarkably clear formulation of this contrast is found in Aquinas:

the reason why the same thing cannot simultaneously and in the same respect be known and believed, is that what is known is seen whereas what is believed is not seen [*scitum est visum et creditum est non visum*]. (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* IIa-IIae, q.1, a.5 ad 4)²

In this tradition, the state of ‘seeing’ (or ‘grasping’) is regarded as the most fundamental, primitive cognitive mode. I use the term ‘knowledge’ as shorthand for a family of cognate states which are usually indicated by terms such as *epistēmē*, *nous*, *noesis*, *katalēpsis*; *scientia*, *scire*, *intellectus*, *intelligere* (with their derivatives in Romance languages); *Wissen*, *wissen*, *begreifen*; *knowledge*, *knowing*,

² *Summa Theologiae* (Thomas Aquinas 1886–7) is cited as ‘*ST*’ followed by part, question, article and adversus numbers where appropriate. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

understanding. For this tradition, knowledge derives directly from its object which is present in a primitive and irreducible way to the mind of the knower. That is, knowledge is a primitive perception or an irreducible mental ‘grasping’ or ‘seeing’ the object of cognition with no gap between knower and known.

This mental state is contrasted with another mode of cognition in which the object of cognition is *not* directly seen or grasped. I use ‘belief’ as shorthand for a family of cognate states usually indicated by terms such as *doxa*, *pistis*; *opinio*, *opinari*, *fides*, *credere* (with their derivatives in Romance languages); *Glaube*, *glauben*, *Meinung*, *meinen*; *belief*, *believing*, *opinion*, *opining*, *credence*, *faith*. For this tradition, belief is a mental state or a cognitive mode in which the perception or presence of the object which characterizes knowledge is lacking. Given this distinction in kind, belief cannot be turned into knowledge without ceasing to be belief, for the simple reason that the state of not-seeing cannot be turned into the state of seeing without ceasing to be not-seeing. More succinctly, ‘seeing’ cannot be a species of ‘not seeing’. Aquinas is again remarkably clear on the mutual exclusivity of these two mental states. They cannot both pertain to the same person at the same time and in the same respect:

all knowledge [*scientia*] is acquired through some self-evident, and therefore ‘seen’, principles [*principia per se nota, et per consequens visa*]. And for that reason it is necessary that whatsoever is known is, in some way, seen [*quaecumque sunt scita aliquo modo esse visa*]. Now, as stated above, it is not possible that the same thing should be believed and seen by the same person. Hence it is indeed impossible that the same thing be known and believed [*scitum et creditum*] by the same person. Nevertheless it may happen that what is seen or known [*visum vel scitum*] by one, is believed by another. (Thomas Aquinas, *ST* IIa–IIae, q.1, a.5)

It is crucial to note that the grounds for believing may be very strong, and belief can be true and strongly justified—and still, on this genuinely traditional account, such belief would not be knowledge, but a different mental state or cognitive mode. Much traditional epistemology would certainly have agreed that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge—not because something else should be added to true justified beliefs, but because knowledge is something fundamentally different from belief.

Drawing inspiration from this historically well-attested model of cognition, I propose an account according to which knowledge and belief are irreducibly distinct kinds of ‘thinking with assent’.³ According to this proposal, knowledge is *not* a kind of belief—not even ‘the best kind’ of believing, as in Williamson’s proposal. In turn, ‘mere believing’ (that is, on Williamson’s account, believing without knowing) is *not* ‘a kind of botched knowing’, but a mental state fundamentally different from knowing, with its own crucial and distinctive role in our cognitive life. Contrary to the claim that belief aims at knowledge (Williamson 2000, pp. 47–8), I argue that the specific contribution of belief to our cognition is that of aiming at truth where and when knowledge is out of our cognitive reach (either for objective or for subjective reasons). In this framework, therefore, belief aims at truth, not at knowledge.

Finally, on this account, knowledge is first in the sense that, ontologically, knowing is the most primitive mode of our cognition, without which there would be no successful cognition. It is not first, however, in the sense that believing has a non-reciprocal, conceptual dependence on knowing: although believing can be understood in terms of not knowing, knowing can likewise be understood in terms of not being in a state of believing.

Before trying to make my case, an important clarification is in order. This discussion is not about which words are used or have been used in a particular language to indicate the main modes of human cognition.⁴ It is about the identification of the main cognitive modes themselves, whatever they are called or have been called in present discourse or in the history of human thought. The claim is that, across time, languages, and different philosophical systems, a prominent strand of thought can be traced which identifies in a broadly similar way some key distinctions in human cognition. In my view, the very fact that, despite vastly different philosophical commitments, certain patterns keep reappearing provides a good indication that these patterns are tracking something which is phenomenally manifest prior to further metaphysical and epistemological claims such as realism or idealism, empiricism or rationalism, and so on. There is a good chance that these distinctions are carving nature at its joints, whatever the labels used in different languages and

³ This account will be developed in Antognazza (forthcoming). I am very grateful to the Mind Association for supporting this project with a Mind Senior Research Fellowship.

⁴ Pace Dutant (2015, p. 112) and Pasnau (2017, p. 219).

historical periods. There is in fact no clean translation from one language to the other, or from one historical period to the other, of what is called what. The same term may be used by different authors or in different periods to indicate quite different things. And yet a careful study of the history of philosophy reveals some remarkably recurrent ways of identifying the fundamental modes of our cognition which resurface across otherwise sharply distinct philosophical views and terminology.

II

The Distinction in Kind in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought. In a paper co-authored with Michael Ayers, I have already traced the conception of knowledge and belief between Plato and Locke (Ayers and Antognazza 2019). In the following section, I will limit myself to briefly summarizing the distinction in kind between knowledge and belief in ancient, medieval, and early modern thought, before devoting more space to what happened to this distinction after Locke.

The Apprehension of 'What Is'. The identification of fundamentally distinct and mutually exclusive modes of cognition, as well as of a cognitive mode in which contact is made with 'what is' (that is, with reality), goes back at least as far as Parmenides. Parmenides's only extant work (a hexameter poem) distinguishes 'the way of truth' (*alētheia*) from 'the way of belief' (*doxa*). With Plato, the distinction in kind between knowledge and belief becomes one of the hallmarks of a hugely influential philosophical tradition which subsequently shapes Western thought. The most extended and explicit development of this view is found in *Republic* V–VII.⁵ As I see it, the key message of the *Republic* is as follows. Knowledge is a state of mind in which—contrary to what happens with belief or *doxa*—what really is, is *seen*. Or, conceiving of it as a power, knowledge is the power to see the Forms, as opposed to opinion, which is the power to judge of appearances. Like the prisoner freed from the cave, it is only by turning away from *doxa* and appearances toward the intelligible world or world of being that knowledge is achieved. In Plato's

⁵ This traditional reading of *Republic* V–VII has been challenged by Fine (1979; 1990). Fine's 'extremely unorthodox' reading has been convincingly rejected, to my mind, by Gonzales (1996).

Republic, knowledge and belief are two different mental states or faculties with distinct cognitive functions: knowledge is a direct cognitive apprehension of what really is; belief is a judgement about what appears to be.

A tentative remark in a footnote of Gettier's short paper of 1963 sparked, however, an opposite interpretation, which has been as dominant in analytical epistemology as the myth that justified true belief is the 'standard' or 'traditional' analysis of knowledge. Plato, Gettier claims in his first footnote, seems to be considering a definition of knowledge as justified true belief at *Theaetetus* 201, and perhaps accepting one at *Meno* 98 (Gettier 1963, p. 121).

But is this what Plato is actually doing? (compare Ayers and Antognazza 2019, pp. 5–11). In the *Theaetetus*, Plato does indeed consider an account of knowledge (*epistēmē*) in the neighbourhood of the JTB analysis formalized by Gettier, but only to reject it. In *Meno* 98, what Socrates claims to know is *that* knowledge and correct judgement (or true belief) are different, not *how* they are different. The explanatory account of how they are different just given at *Meno* 98a in terms of the addition of a reason (*aitia*, *logos*) to true belief, is straightaway demoted to guesswork at *Meno* 98b. Most importantly, there is something which Socrates *knows* (namely, that true belief and knowledge are different) without having an account of this difference. It follows that at least some knowledge is more primitive than any true belief plus an account and is already presupposed by the process of 'working out' the reason or *logos* of certain beliefs or judgements. In short, the *Meno* already bears the suspicion of circularity toward a JTB type of account, which will be brought to the forefront in the third part of the *Theaetetus*.⁶ The upshot is that cognition starts with something irreducibly primary which is already knowledge. Knowledge is not a complex and, therefore, derivative entity resulting from something else (true belief, judgement, opinion) plus the addition of some other ingredient.

Nous, *Epistēmē*, and *Katalēpsis*. For Aristotle, cognition is, at its most basic, one of the natural states or natural activities of which certain kinds of living beings are capable. It is set apart from other natural states or activities by a peculiar feature, namely, the kind of

⁶ This point is convincingly argued by Sedley (2004, pp. 176–8). Compare Ayers and Antognazza (2019, pp. 9–10) and Gerson (2009, pp. 28–30).

unity which the cognitive act establishes between perceiver and perceived, or between knower and known—a kind of unity in which the ontological distinction between perceiver and perceived, knower and known, is at the same time maintained. This unity is observed by Aristotle, first of all, in sense-perception:

The actuality of the object of perception and of the senses are one and the same, but their being is different. I mean, for example, actual sound and actual hearing. For it is possible for someone who has hearing not to be hearing; and what has sound is not always making a sound. But whenever what is able to hear is in actuality hearing and whatever is able to sound is sounding, then actual hearing and actual sounding come about simultaneously. . . . And since there is one actuality of the sensible object and what is capable of perceiving, though their being is different, it is necessary that what is spoken of in this way as hearing and sounding perish or be preserved at the same time (Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book III, ch. 2, 425b, 426a; translation by Shields, in Aristotle 2016, pp. 52–3).

It seems to me that the core of Aristotle's position as outlined in the passage above is as follows: the act of perceiving consists in a pure presence or manifestation of the object of perception to the perceiver with no gap between them. In this respect, intellectual 'perception' is analogous, for Aristotle, to sense-perception: 'Both reasoning and understanding seem to be a sort of perceiving, for in both of these cases, the soul discriminates something and comes to know things that are' (*De Anima*, Book III, ch. 3, 427a; Aristotle 2016, p. 55). Later on, the Scholastics translated Aristotle's view as *cognoscens in actu et cognitum in actu sunt unum* ('in the act of knowing, the knower is one with the known, in its being known'), and called this unity 'intentional'. It is this intentional unity that is captured metaphorically by reference to cognitive 'contact' and the absence of a 'gap'. In brief, to be known is to be present to the mind, and to know is this presence of the object to the mind.⁷

Hellenistic philosophies such as Epicureanism and Stoicism conceive 'what is', or what is ultimately real, in ways which are fundamentally different from the accounts provided by Plato or Aristotle. It is therefore all the more remarkable that, notwithstanding their alternative metaphysical models, they agree with Plato and Aristotle in

⁷ Attention to these passages and to this conception of knowledge is drawn by Vanni Rovighi (1962, pp. 113–15; 1963–79, p. 25).

drawing a sharp distinction between knowledge and belief, and in acknowledging a mental state in which cognitive subjects are in contact with ‘what is’. Whether the ultimately real is conceived as intelligible objects or as material objects, there is a fundamental cognitive mode constituted by the presence to a cognitive subject of those objects. Belief, on the other hand, is a different mental state, in which there is no such direct apprehension of ‘what is’.

Crucial to Stoic epistemology, in particular, is the notion of *katalēpsis* (literally, ‘grasp’), introduced by the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium, as a technical term to indicate the immediate *sense-perceptual* or *intellectual grasp* which provides the foundation of all cognition. In a key passage, Sextus summarizes the relationship between *epistēmē*, *katalēpsis*, and *doxa* in Stoicism as follows:

For they [the Stoics] hold that three things are linked to each other: knowledge, belief and placed between these, grasping. Of these, knowledge is sure and stable grasping unalterable by reasoning; belief is weak and false assent; and grasping is what is between these, assent to a graspable presentation. According to the Stoics, a graspable presentation is true and such that there could not be a false one just like it. They say that knowledge is present only in the wise, belief is present only in base men, but that grasping is common to both groups ... (Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VII.151–2/SVF 1.68–9; translation from Gerson 2009, p. 104)⁸

The common factor in *epistēmē* and *katalēpsis* is ‘grasp’. What sets *doxa* (belief, opinion) apart from these two mental states or cognitive modes seems to be precisely the *lack* of such a grasp. What links all three is *assent*:⁹ *epistēmē*, *katalēpsis* and *doxa* all involve assent, but the Stoics take a very dim view of belief, since on their account this is a mental state in which assent is given without being in contact with ‘what is’—something the wise person would never do. Needless to say, ‘assent’ and ‘belief’ are not the same thing, and should not be confused with one another.

Scire, Credere, and ‘Thinking with Assent’. After the recovery of Aristotle between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the distinction between knowing (*scire*) and believing (*credere, opinari*) is spelled

⁸ ‘SVF’ abbreviates the *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Arnim 1903–5).

⁹ Gerson (2009, p. 104): ‘Minimally, the “linkage” that exists between belief, grasping and knowledge is that they all require assent.’

out in remarkably clear terms by Thomas Aquinas. In *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q.2, a.1, Aquinas starts from Augustine's remark that to believe (*credere*) is to think with assent (*cum assensione cogitare*) (Augustine, *De Praedestinatione*, 2.5). Aquinas agrees, but develops Augustine's point by inserting it into a broader account of cognition in which believing (*credere*) is compared with other cognitive modes—notably, knowing (*scire*).

Taken in a broad sense, Aquinas argues, 'thinking with assent' does not capture what is distinctive of believing (*credere*) as a cognitive mode, because the person 'who considers the things that she knows [*scit*] or understands [*intelligit*], [also] thinks with assent' (ST IIa-IIae, q.2, a.1). What distinguishes understanding and knowing, on the one hand, and opining or believing, on the other, is the different way in which assent is determined: in understanding or knowing, assent is directly moved by the presence of the object of cognition to a cognitive subject, compelling assent; in opining or believing, the object of cognition is not directly present, and assent is moved by reasons of variable strength, leaving a role to the will:

Now the intellect assents [*assentit*] to something in two ways. One way, because it is moved to assent by the object itself [*ab ipso objecto*], which is known either through itself [*per seipsum cognitum*] (as in the case of first principles, of which there is understanding [*intellectus*]), or through something else already known [*per aliud cognitum*] (as in the case of conclusions, of which there is knowledge [*scientia*]). In another way, the intellect assents to something, not because it is sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through a certain voluntary choice turning toward one side rather than the other. And if this is done with doubt or fear of the opposite side, there will be opinion [*opinio*]; if, on the other hand, this is done with certainty [*cum certitudine*] and without such fear, there will be faith [*fides*]. Now those things are said to be seen [*videri dicuntur*] which, by themselves, move our intellect or the senses to knowledge of them [*ad sui cognitionem*]. Wherefore it is evident [*manifestum est*] that neither faith nor opinion can be of things seen [*nec fides nec opinio potest esse de visis*] either by the senses or by the intellect. (Thomas Aquinas, ST IIa-IIae, q.1, a.4)

The contrast between seen and not seen, tracking the contrast between known and believed, returns repeatedly throughout the part of the *Summa* devoted to faith, emerging as one of the hallmarks of Aquinas's account (see ST IIa-IIae, q.1-16).

Evidence, Knowledge, and Belief. If we turn now to seventeenth-century textbook historiography, we find a tendency to regard early modern epistemology as being dominated by the ‘traditional’ conception of knowledge as justified true belief. The trouble with this account is quite straightforward: it does not square with what Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, and other early modern thinkers actually say about knowledge (see [Carriero 2013](#); [Ayers and Antognazza 2019](#), pp. 16–23). Instead of finding in their texts the view that beliefs are the starting point of knowledge, we find the view that knowledge can start only by turning away from beliefs and opinions (Descartes). Instead of finding knowledge as a species of belief, we find that knowledge is a state of mind irreducibly different from belief, since it is *seeing* (perceiving) what in the state of belief we *cannot see*, for instance, that it is sense-perception of external, bodily objects or mental *perception* of connections between two or more ideas (Locke). At the opposite end of the metaphysical spectrum, knowledge (in its adequate, full form) is nothing less than a revised version of the traditional *visio Dei* (the vision of God) or beatific vision—that is, a vision of all things in God (Malebranche) or (in a more radical reconception) intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) of God as the only one substance of which everything else is a mode (Spinoza).¹⁰ Both the Epicurean/Stoic/Empiricist strand and the Platonic/Neoplatonic/Augustinian/Rationalist strand of seventeenth-century epistemology think of knowledge as a kind of seeing (by the senses or by the intellect). Neither of these strands thinks of knowledge as a kind of belief with the addition of certain conditions.

The invitation to turn away from opinions fills the first of Descartes’s *Meditations*, and is one of the leitmotifs of the *Discourse on the Method*. In these key texts of Descartes’s philosophical maturity, the conception of knowledge as evidence comes fully to the fore. Evidence is taken in its primary (and nowadays often overlooked) sense, derived from the Latin *ex* (from) + *videre* (to see).¹¹ Evidence is only secondarily a set of reasons for believing something; primarily it is a ‘visibility’ or ‘seeableness’ which allows an immediate apprehension by the mind. For Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz,

¹⁰ See especially Malebranche’s *Recherche*, book III, and Spinoza’s *Ethica*, Part II, Propositions 40–47; cf. [Carriero \(2013, p. 184\)](#).

¹¹ For an illuminating discussion of the primary versus secondary sense of evidence see [Ayers \(2019, pp. 34, 66–7, 115–16, 118–19, 194\)](#).

intellectual cognition connects us (at least to some extent) to the intelligible essences of things (Carriero 2013, pp. 184, 189).

Despite the great differences between Cartesian and Lockean epistemology, Locke's definition of knowledge in the *Essay* (Book IV, ch. I, §2) is in line with the Cartesian notion of a clear and distinct vision ('evidence') of the connection between objects of thought. In my view, however, the deepest common element in the Cartesian and Lockean accounts is not their stress on relations of ideas, but their stress on knowledge as *seeing* (either literally in sense-perception or metaphorically in mental perception). 'Knowledge', Locke writes, 'seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*. In this alone it consists. Where this Perception is, there is Knowledge, and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of Knowledge' (*Essay*, Book IV, ch. I, §2). From this very definition of knowledge onward, Locke draws a sharp distinction between knowledge and belief: the domain of knowledge is the domain in which we *perceive* the connection (or lack of connection) between ideas; the domain of belief is the domain in which we are unable to perceive such connection but *presume* it (*Essay*, Book IV, ch. XIV, §4). There is no talk of justifying beliefs to turn them into knowledge, or of conditions or criteria by which beliefs can count as knowledge. Belief, for Locke, is quite simply a different kind of epistemic state from knowledge.

To summarize. Belief is different in kind from knowledge in that it lacks the evidence *a parte rei*, that is, a perception by the mind or a presence to the mind of the object of cognition which by itself compels assent. On the one hand, this is a limitation of belief, exposed as it is to the only too familiar cases of misplaced trust, fanciful guesses, and so on. On the other hand, belief is a cognitive mode the importance of which is difficult to exaggerate, in that it enables us to extend the grip of our cognition beyond our actual and, crucially, possible knowledge.

III

The Gap between Mind and World: Scepticism Redivivus. It may be tempting to wave through the above discussion by dismissing it as an historian of philosophy's pedantry. Gettier was, obviously, not

doing history of philosophy, and neither are modern analytic philosophers. No need therefore to get upset or to write long refutations. Instead, let it be taken for granted that an innocent historical mistake was made in attributing the JTB analysis to Plato, and that equally innocently, this mistake mushroomed into the orthodox view for generations of epistemology students. The next editions of epistemology textbooks can leave out any mention of Plato and all will be well. In what follows, however, I will try to show that if there are any truly innocent mistakes in history, this is not one of them.

The Inflated Use of 'Belief'. I contend that 'belief' has become a catch-all category for all sorts of mental states for historical and philosophical reasons linked to the sceptical attack against a conception of cognition according to which there is a primitive contact between mind and reality. More specifically, the inflated use of 'belief' in twentieth-century philosophy has its roots in Humean scepticism. Once scepticism declared that all putative knowledge is really, at bottom, belief—that is, a state traditionally conceived as lacking a direct presence to the mind of the object of cognition—the scene was set for a conception of belief as the umbrella under which to group all cognitive modes. The later attempt to rescue knowledge from this sceptical attack—via the specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions belief must meet to qualify as knowledge—led precisely to the conception of knowledge as JTB+ criticized in this paper and increasingly regarded as a philosophical cul-de-sac.

It is significant that, in anglophone epistemology, it has recently become customary to distinguish 'belief' from 'credence'. The term 'belief' is now usually reserved for an on-off state—also labelled 'categorical' belief, or 'full-blown' belief, or 'binary' belief—while the term 'credence' is reserved for 'scalar' belief, that is, for a state which admits of degrees. 'Credence', however, is nothing other than the Latin version of the Germanic 'belief'. Their synonymity is rooted in similar etymological origins from 'hold dear', 'give credit', 'confide', 'trust'.¹² Interestingly, the artificially distinct use of these two terms in present-day anglophone epistemology cannot be replicated in a straightforward way in Romance languages such as Italian or French. This distinct use signals, however, something very

¹² Note that, unlike 'belief' and 'credence', 'assent' does not share these etymologies—this is, in my view, another important indication that belief/credence and assent should not be conflated.

important, namely, a growing acknowledgement in anglophone epistemology that aspects of our cognition that have commonly been subsumed in post-Humean epistemology under the notion of ‘belief’ need instead to be distinguished.

In sum, as noted by William Alston, over the past century or so, anglophone epistemology has been characterized by ‘an inflated use of “believe” in which ‘the term “belief” has been allowed to spread over any positive propositional attitude’ (Alston 1996, p. 20). This blanket use of ‘belief’ was, however, far from standard in the philosophical tradition stretching back to antiquity. Nor was it approved by the very architect of anglophone epistemology, John Locke, who took such great care in ensuring that the term ‘belief’ was not a general term which also covered knowledge.

Most importantly, in post-Humean anglophone epistemology, the term ‘belief’ has been employed in an equivocal way which has conflated different things. On the one hand, it has been used to indicate an act or state of mental acknowledgement or affirmation—a mental act or mental state which is marked in the history of philosophy by terms such as *sunkatathesis*; *assensio*, *assentio* (*ads-*), *assentire* (with their derivatives in Romance languages); *assent*, *agreement*, *affirmation*, *assertion*, *positing*; *Fürwahrhalten*, *Anerkennung*, *Bejahung*, *Zustimmung*, *Setzung*. This mental acknowledgement or affirmation applies generally, irrespective of whether what is affirmed is directly seen or grasped (compelling assent), or is not directly seen or grasped. On the other hand, ‘belief’ has also been used to indicate the specific mental state or mental act by which something which is *not* directly seen or grasped is nevertheless affirmed on the basis of reasons of varying degrees of strength, rendering assent more or less justified.

Of course, as I have mentioned above, what is important is not what *terms* we choose to indicate a more general cognitive mode and its species, but what the most fundamental modes of human cognition are and how they are distinct from one another. One could continue to use ‘belief’ for genus and species. But I see no advantage in this equivocal use in a philosophical context, when there is an historically well-attested way to mark this key distinction, as well as, more importantly, an historical reason which explains why the equivocal and inflated use of ‘belief’ is not philosophically neutral.

What is at stake is whether there are or are not cognitive mental states which are different in kind: that is, whether there is a mental

state in which there is a cognitive contact with 'what is', and a mental state in which there is no such contact. If all our cognition is reduced to the latter (namely, to what a long tradition going back to Plato calls 'belief' as opposed to 'knowledge'), the gap between mind and reality makes it impossible to be sure whether our cognition ever hits the mark. In short, scepticism wins the day.

Scepticism is, of course, as old as philosophy. Views which raise sceptical worries or have sceptical implications go as far back as the Presocratics and the Sophists, not least as far as the relativism expressed by Protagoras in the famous motto, 'Man is the measure of all things'.¹³ One of the most significant ways in which Humean philosophy shaped early modern and modern Western thought is by breathing new life into Protagoras's ancient dictum. This is not at all to claim that Hume's thought can be regarded as a straight case of relativism, subjectivism or scepticism. There are, however, sceptical aspects to it that have far-reaching consequences and which, I claim, have informed in a significant way the JTB+ theory of knowledge. It is in fact important to note that ancient scepticism (and scepticism more broadly) typically accepts the Platonic distinction between reality and appearance, but unlike Plato, holds that as cognitive subjects we have access only to appearances. That is, the only cognitive mode available to us is belief, not knowledge. A similar awareness of the distinction in kind between knowledge and belief, coupled with the conclusion that we really only achieve belief, is also found, I argue, in Hume.

'*All Our Knowledge Degenerates into Probability*'. Hume devotes only a few pages to knowledge proper (see *Treatise*, Book I, part III, §I and Book I, part IV, §I; *Enquiry*, §4). However short and perfunctory such treatment may be, it reveals what counts, for him, as knowledge in the strict sense, what are its limits, and how sharply it should be distinguished from belief (see Kemp Smith 1941, pp. 349–63). Knowledge is restricted to relations of ideas, that is, to analytic a priori propositions. These propositions 'are either intuitively or demonstratively certain' and 'discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe' (Hume, *Enquiry*, §4; cf. *Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §I).

¹³ See Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e and Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VII.60 (*Against Logicians*, pp. 32–3). Protagoras's views are criticized by Plato in the first part of the *Theaetetus*.

Geometry, algebra, and arithmetic are the sciences which have this kind of propositions as their object. These are ‘demonstrative sciences’, the rules of which ‘are certain and infallible’ (*Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §1).

The trouble is, Hume hastens to say, that also in these matters we are so prone to error that ‘all our knowledge degenerates into probability’. ‘Knowledge and probability’, however, ‘are of such contrary and disagreeing natures, that they cannot well run insensibly into each other, and that because they will not divide, but must be entirely present, or entirely absent’ (*Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §1). That is, Hume is perfectly aware that probability, however high, does not turn into knowledge (*pace* much present-day formal epistemology). Knowledge and probability are two cognitive modes with distinct natures.

This being the case, one may be surprised by Hume’s claim, a few lines below, that ‘therefore knowledge resolves itself into probability, and becomes at last of the same nature with that evidence, which we employ in common life’. What Hume is saying is that although there is, in principle, a kind of cognition which counts strictly as knowledge, in fact, owing to the fallibility of our reason, we achieve only probability. This weaker kind of cognition has ‘the same nature’ as the kind of cognition that ‘we employ in common life’ or in all matters of fact, namely, belief.

‘Matters of fact’ (as opposed to ‘relations of ideas’),¹⁴ including the existence of external bodies and causal relations (that is, necessary connections between objects), are indeed objects not of *knowledge* but of *belief*. The latter is a *natural* belief, that is, the result of natural psychological features of the human mind, analogous to the instinct which successfully guides other non-human animals through life (see *Treatise*, Book I, part III, §IV; *Enquiry*, §9). Because of the way in which our mind naturally works, we cannot but believe in the existence of external bodies and causal relations. Whether there *are* (independently of what we irresistibly believe) external bodies or causal relations is, however, beyond the limits of our cognition. Therefore, asking whether bodies do or do not exist is an idle question. ‘We may well

¹⁴ ‘All the objects of human reason or enquiry’ divide for Hume ‘into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*’ (*Enquiry*, §4, part 1).

ask', Hume writes, '*What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings. The subject, then, in our present enquiry is concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body' (*Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §II).

Belief in the independent existence of bodies, as well as belief in causal relations and in the existence of a cognitive subject, is not the result of reasoning but of custom or habit, and is attended by 'some sentiment or feeling' which distinguishes it from fiction (see *Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §I, and part III, §§VII and XIV; *Enquiry*, §5, part 2). Thus what rescues us from scepticism is not reason, but 'nature', that is, a 'species of instinct' by which we naturally believe certain things (see *Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §I; *Enquiry*, §§5 and 9). In this sense, man is the measure of all things and wondering whether things really are as we believe them to be is simply absurd.¹⁵

Going forward, once cognition has been reduced, in fact, to belief and probability, it may seem that the only way to avoid scepticism is to redefine knowledge as a special kind of belief. This is precisely what JTB+ theories of knowledge (including their many variants as warranted belief, strongly warranted belief, belief which tracks truth, belief with a sufficiently high degree of probability, belief which could not easily have been wrong, and so on) have tried and (now according to many) failed to do. While their intention is to keep scepticism at bay, their recurrent failure to do so is rooted in their being, ultimately, the offspring of a sceptical outlook. The crux of the matter is not whether we are content to call (or have become accustomed to call) 'knowledge' some kind of belief (however probable, or entitled, or permissible, or incorrigible such belief may be), but whether our cognition puts us in touch with 'what is' as opposed to only what appears to be.

¹⁵ Hume writes, '... whether it be the *senses*, *reason*, or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence [of objects]. These are the only questions, that are intelligible on the present subject. For as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shewn its absurdity' (*Treatise*, Book I, part IV, §1).

IV

The Distinction in Kind between Knowledge and Belief after Hume.

Wissen, Glauben, and Fürwahrhalten. Famously, Kant was awakened from his ‘dogmatic slumber’ (Ak 4:260)¹⁶ by Hume. This wake-up call set him on the path of critical philosophy, eventually leading to a radical reconception of how the classic distinction in kind between knowledge and belief applies to human cognition.

This section argues that, like Plato, Kant thinks of knowledge and belief as cognitive modes which are different in kind and have, in some important cases, different objects. One key difference in respect to Plato is that Kant inverts what can be known and what we can only believe. Knowledge is only of what falls within the boundaries of our possible experience bounded by space and time, the *a priori* forms of our sensible intuition (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A26/B42, A33/B49). That is, knowledge is only of the sensible. Physical objects as we know them are not ‘things in themselves’ (noumena, things as they really are), but phenomena constructed, in important respects, by our mind; we know and conceive of them only as they appear to us (compare Adams 1987, p. 5). Crucially, it is precisely because they are, to some extent, mental constructions that there is no gap between mind and phenomenal world, and knowledge is therefore possible. Conversely, there can be no knowledge of what is separated from us by an ontological and epistemological gap. In this respect, Kant too endorses the view that a *conditio sine qua non* of knowledge is the absence of a gap between cognizer and cognized. Where there is such a gap, we have to turn to types of cognition other than knowledge.

As shown by Andrew Chignell in his insightful paper ‘Belief in Kant’, the genus under which Kant groups more specific cognitive modes is *Fürwahrhalten*, ‘that is, “assent” or, more literally, “holding-for-true”’ (Chignell 2007, p. 324).¹⁷ In the Canon of Pure Reason of the first *Critique* (A820/B848–A831/B859), Kant offers a fine-grained taxonomy of the modes of our cognition according to

¹⁶ Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998) is cited using the standard A and B edition numbering; all other works are cited as ‘Ak’ followed by volume and page number of the Akademie edition of his works (Kant 1900–).

¹⁷ My discussion is indebted to this splendid paper, although I have a different take on some of the issues discussed.

which persuasion (*Überredung*), opinion (*Meinung*), belief (*Glaube*), conviction (*Überzeugung*), and knowledge (*Wissen*) are all grouped under the genus *Fürwahrhalten*.

In general, there is some form of assenting when we have *sufficient* (*zureichend*) grounds for it. What distinguishes the different species of assenting from one another is the combination of two different kinds of grounds, namely, objective grounds and subjective grounds. Objective grounds are valid for any rational being and are therefore, at least in principle, communicable. Typically, they not only make assent rationally permissible, but compel or necessitate assent. Subjective grounds, on the other hand, lay ‘solely in the subject’, that is, ‘in the particular constitution’ of a certain individual (A820/B848).

As I interpret it, *Fürwahrhalten* is the generic cognitive mental act of assenting. Classically, it is the mental act of judgement or of ‘thinking with assent’. Persuasion (*Überredung*), opinion (*Meinung*), belief (*Glaube*), conviction (*Überzeugung*), and knowledge (*Wissen*) are all different species of it. Knowledge may be seen as a species of conviction but certainly not as a species of persuasion (*Überredung*), opinion (*Meinung*), or belief (*Glaube*): objectively sufficient grounds are in fact required by knowledge (and by conviction), whereas the other three mental acts are partially defined by the absence of objectively sufficient grounds.¹⁸ Moreover, neither knowledge nor conviction appears to have, for Kant, a voluntary element. By contrast, both opinion and belief have an element of voluntariness which, in the absence (by definition) of objectively sufficient grounds, plays a role in determining assent either on subjectively insufficient grounds (opinion), or on subjectively sufficient grounds of a pragmatic, theoretical, or moral nature (belief). Finally, unlike persuasion, neither opinion nor belief imply a cognitive *mistake*: those who are persuaded mistake in fact their subjective grounds for objective grounds; by contrast, those who opine or believe are aware that they do so on objectively insufficient grounds. Opinion and belief are, therefore, imperfect kinds of cognition rather than cognitive failures (see Ak 24:218). Most importantly, notwithstanding their imperfection, they have the remarkable merit of extending cognition in a *sui generis* way beyond the boundaries of actual or possible knowledge.

¹⁸ Le Morvan’s rejection of the claim that, for Kant, knowledge is a species of belief tallies with the point I am making. See Le Morvan (2017, pp. 1225–7), esp. p. 1227: ‘knowledge (essentially) has what belief (essentially) lacks (namely, objective sufficiency)’.

Indeed, the most remarkable cognitive role is played by theoretical and moral belief in cases in which knowledge is unavailable not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*: theoretical and moral belief accomplishes the substantial feat of opening up ‘prospects’ on things-in-themselves (see A830/B858).

The interpretation I have presented is likely to face the fairly obvious objection that the structure of Kant’s proposal is that of the JTB+ analysis, with *Fürwahrhalten* or ‘assent’ playing the functional role of what in the twentieth century is called ‘belief’. My reply is as follows. If one wishes to call ‘belief’ what the tradition has called ‘assenting’ or ‘thinking with assent’, and Kant has called *Fürwahrhalten*, this is of course fine. The issue is not which word we use, but which mental act is referred to by that word. What is crucial is that the mental act at stake here is a generic act of affirmation or acknowledgment which must not be conflated with what Hume called ‘belief’. As far as I can see, historically, the latter is the sense of belief which has underpinned JTB+ theories. In so far as this is the case, both the letter and the spirit of Kant’s proposal is very different from the JTB+ analysis of knowledge.

At the core of the Kantian proposal there is the (frankly Platonic) idea of cognitive modes which are sharply distinguished by their objects and by the function they play in relation to those objects. Knowledge (*Wissen*) has phenomena as its objects; belief (*Glaube*) has things-in-themselves as its objects. In the phenomenal world, knowledge is possible because physical objects, as we know them, are constituted through the a priori forms of our sensible intuition, that is, they are in some sense mental constructions. Therefore, there is no irreducible epistemic and ontological gap between mind and world. By contrast, knowledge of things-in-themselves is not possible owing to the ontological gap between the noumenal world and the world of our possible experience bounded by space and time. We can turn, however, to a different cognitive mode: ‘rational Belief, in which the act of assenting has the same degree as in Knowledge [*das Fürwahrhalten eben den Grad hat als beym Wissen*], but is of *another kind*’ (Ak 16:371–72; translation modified and emphasis added).¹⁹ This is a cognitive mode which cannot and does not bridge the ontological gap (that is, it is not and cannot be ‘the cognition of grounds in the object’ Ak 16:371–72) but still responds to the needs

¹⁹ Chignell (2007, p. 349 n.32) draws attention to this passage.

of reason, opening thereby rationally grounded ‘prospects beyond the bound of experience’ (A830/B858).²⁰

Knowledge and Apprehension. In more recent times, the distinction in kind between knowledge and belief is reaffirmed in uncompromisingly strong terms by the philosophical movement that flourished in Oxford in the early twentieth century and which is known as Oxford Realism.²¹ Although its inspirer, John Cook Wilson (1849–1915), did not publish a great deal during his lifetime, his philosophical positions influenced Oxford philosophy for several generations,²² grounding a tradition of Oxford realism which stretches, arguably, as far as the current philosophical work of leading philosophers as diverse as John McDowell and Timothy Williamson.

Cook Wilson opposes any attempt to define knowledge in terms of belief plus additional conditions such as truth and justification. Most emphatically, for him, knowledge is *not* a species of belief. In the words of his student and later White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, H. A. Prichard:

Knowing is absolutely different from what is called indifferently believing or being convinced or being persuaded or having an opinion ... Knowing and believing differ in kind as do desiring and feeling ... Their difference in kind is not that of species and genus, like that of a red colour and a colour. To know is not to have a belief of a special kind, differing from beliefs of other kinds; and no improvement in a belief and no increase in the feeling of conviction which it implies will convert it into knowledge. (Prichard 1950, p. 87)²³

Furthermore, for Cook Wilson, ‘the man who knows does not believe at all what he knows; he knows it’ (1926, p. 100). That is, believing is a different mental state, which is not entailed by knowing.

²⁰ As regards the massively controversial question of whether we can relate at all to things-in-themselves, I side here with Chignell’s proposal of ‘Liberalism’. For ‘Liberals’, ‘theoretical reason itself can provide grounds on which to form assertoric rather than merely problematic assents about certain things-in-themselves’ (Chignell 2007, pp. 357–9).

²¹ On Cook Wilson and Oxford Realism, see the excellent accounts offered by Marion (2000, 2015) and by Travis and Kalderon (2013) on which I am drawing.

²² Among others, H. A. Prichard (1871–1947), Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976), and J. L. Austin (1911–1960). On the connection between Austin and the Oxford Realism tradition see Longworth (2018).

²³ See also Urmson (1988, p. 15): ‘I do have much sympathy with the view of Cook Wilson and Prichard that ... knowledge has to be contrasted with belief and opinion rather than being treated as a special case of belief.’

At the root of this position is the view that knowledge cannot be reductively analysed or defined in terms of something else, because knowledge is a *sui generis*, non-derivative ‘frame of mind’.²⁴ In modern parlance, knowledge is a primitive mental state (see Travis and Kalderon 2013, p. 499). From 1906 onwards, Cook Wilson calls this primitive mental state ‘apprehension’. As he puts it, ‘we cannot *construct* knowing—the act of apprehending—out of any elements’ (Cook Wilson 1926, p. 803). Although undefined, for Cook Wilson, apprehension appears to be close to Aristotle’s *noesis*. That is, ‘apprehension’ is a direct grasp of the object of cognition, a direct seeing ‘what is’. As this primitive apprehension, knowledge is presupposed by other activities of thinking, such as believing and opining (see Cook Wilson 1926, pp. 86–7, 92–3, 96; Marion 2015, §3).

Moreover, knowledge is not a matter of having ‘evidence’ for a certain opinion or belief,²⁵ but of being aware of ‘some fact of nature’ (Travis and Kalderon 2013, p. 500).²⁶ As Austin writes in a famous passage of *Sense and Sensibilia*:

The situation in which I would properly be said to have *evidence* for the statement that some animal is a pig is that, for example, in which the beast itself is not actually on view, but I can see plenty of pig-like marks on the ground outside its retreat. If I find a few buckets of pig-food, that’s a bit more evidence, and the noises and the smell may provide better evidence still. But if the animal then emerges and stands there plainly in view, there is no longer any question of collecting evidence; its coming into view doesn’t provide me with more *evidence* that it’s a pig, I can now just *see* that it is, the question is settled. (Austin 1962, p. 115; compare Cook Wilson 1926, p. 100)

I would like to note the structural similarity between Cook Wilson and Prichard’s accounts and Aquinas’s two manners in which we assent to something. The Oxford Realists contrast two mental states which are different in kind: on the one hand, knowledge, that is, the direct apprehension of an object or the awareness of a fact of nature,

²⁴ Compare Cook Wilson (1926, p. 100): ‘our experience of knowing then being the presupposition of any inquiry we can undertake, we cannot make knowing itself a subject of inquiry in the sense of asking what knowledge is’.

²⁵ ‘Evidence’ is taken here in its secondary sense, that is, as the reasons or arguments which support a belief, as opposed to its primary sense as a perspicuous presentation of something which is clearly seen or understood.

²⁶ I take it that ‘fact’ is understood here as a concrete, as opposed to an abstract, entity. On the importance of keeping these two conceptions of facts distinct, see Hyman’s illuminating discussion (Hyman 2017).

requiring no decision; on the other hand, the mental state in which the object of cognition (the pig of Austin's example) is not directly present and, therefore, reasons external to the object of cognition itself are needed in order to take a decision (is there a pig or not?).²⁷ Aquinas contrasts two manners in which we are moved to assent (*ST* IIa-IIae, q.1, a.4): on the one hand, understanding and knowledge (*intellectus* and *scientia*) in which assent is compelled by the object itself ('*ab ipso objecto*') of which there is clear sight ('*manifesta visio*'); on the other hand, belief and opinion in which there is no clear sight of the object of cognition which sufficiently moves assent, and external reasons ('something else already known') are therefore needed in order to take a decision ('through a certain voluntary choice turning toward one side rather than the other').

Drawing especially on Aquinas, the neo-Scholastic movement that thrives in Catholic circles in a period roughly contemporary to Oxford Realism recovers and institutionalizes this and other key insights of the thirteen-century theory of cognition.²⁸ Neo-Scholastic thinkers typically agree that 'knowing, cognition, knowledge, is *sui generis*, that therefore it cannot properly speaking be defined, or explained in terms of anything other than itself' since 'nothing is more intimate to us than knowing' (Coffey 1917, p. 25). The level of institutionalization of this view is shown by its reception in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* composed between 1905 and 1914. The entry 'knowledge' begins by stating, 'Knowledge, being a primitive fact of consciousness, cannot, strictly speaking, be defined; but the direct and spontaneous consciousness of knowing may be made clearer by pointing out its essential and distinctive characteristics'. That is, 'Knowledge is essentially the consciousness of an object' (Dubray 1910). 'Belief', in turn, is described as 'that state of the mind by which it assents to propositions, not by reason of their intrinsic evidence'. This state of mind, the entry laments, 'is often used indiscriminately ... for other states of mind'; in particular, it should be distinguished 'from the assent of knowledge' (Aveling 1907).

Moreover, neo-Scholastic textbooks identify 'apprehension' or 'simple apprehension' (*apprehensio simplex*) as the starting point of all knowledge in so far as it is 'the act of mind' which 'places an object before consciousness' (Rickaby 1888, part I, ch. ii, §1). 'To

²⁷ Note that, for Cook Wilson, judging (believing and opining) are 'decisions' (compare Cook Wilson 1926, pp. 93, 96).

²⁸ For key authors and texts in this tradition, see <https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/aristotl.htm>.

apprehend’, they explain, ‘is to take hold of a thing as if with the hand; an *apprehension*, as an act of the mind, is an intellectual grasping of an object’ (Coppens 1891, *Logic*, book I, ch. i, §9). Although apprehension is typically treated as an intellectual act of mind, the neo-Scholastics acknowledge an analogous process of cognitive apprehension in sense-perception, enabling ‘the animal in different ways to acquire cognition of the material objects with which it comes into immediate or mediate contact’ (Coppens 1891, *Mental Philosophy*, book III, ch. ii, §161; see also Rickaby 1888, part II, ch. ii).

These striking similarities between two philosophical movements as far apart as Oxford Realism and neo-Scholasticism are not too surprising if one considers their common source in Aristotle and other aspects of ancient philosophy. Cook Wilson and his contemporaries at Oxford typically emerged into philosophy from the intensive study of Aristotle (it is certainly no accident that Cook Wilson, having read classics and mathematics at Balliol, contributed regularly to the study of ancient philosophy). For their part, the neo-Scholastics knew their Aristotle chapter and verse through the mediation of Aquinas. Most importantly for the matter at hand, the view of knowledge as an unanalysable, primitive mental state by which we are in conscious cognitive contact with an object, and which is distinct in kind from belief—a view held by both Oxford Realism and neo-Scholasticism—indicates the strength and pervasiveness of a tradition of non-sceptical philosophy of cognition going back to ancient philosophy and its medieval developments, and finding its expression in philosophical contexts with very different intellectual agendas.

More generally, it turns out that even in the first half of the twentieth century, the so-called standard analysis of knowledge is not so standard after all. Surprisingly, the only clear-cut (as opposed to ‘in the ballpark’) example of a definition of knowledge as justified true belief to be found in the decades immediately preceding Gettier’s paper of 1963 appears to be C. I. Lewis’s definition in *An Analysis of Knowledge* (1946, p. 9): ‘Knowledge is belief which not only is true but is also justified in its believing attitude.’²⁹

²⁹ This is the conclusion reached by Le Morvan (2017). Even Ayer’s definition of knowledge—‘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’ (Ayer 1956, p. 34)—is a ‘ballpark’ case

V

Conclusion

The Main Battle-Line. According to the interpretation I have offered, there is a dividing line in epistemology which runs horizontally throughout the entire history of philosophy: it is the division between sceptical and non-sceptical philosophy of cognition. That is, the main battle-line in the history of epistemology is drawn between the affirmation of a natural mental state in which there is a contact between *cognoscens* and *cognitum*, ‘mind’ and ‘reality’ (whatever the ontological nature of this ‘reality’), and the rejection of such a natural mental state. For the former position, there is a mental state which is different in kind from belief, and which is constituted by the presence of the object of cognition to the cognitive subject, with no gap between them. For the latter position, all our cognition is belief, and the question becomes how and when belief is permissible.

These two broad traditions face one another from the beginning: one starting, roughly, with Parmenides and Plato, the other starting, roughly, with Protagoras’s relativism and ancient scepticism. Although in different historical periods one strand may seem to gain the upper hand over the other, each is remarkably resilient in its capacity to take new forms adapted to the spirit of the time. Under the pressure of Humean-type scepticism, however, sceptical philosophy of cognition achieved a new prominence and led eventually to the JTB+ conception of knowledge dominant in twentieth-century anglophone analytical epistemology. The shift to counting ‘reasonable, warranted, justified belief’ or ‘entitled true beliefs’ as *knowledge* is both a watershed in epistemology and a deviation from the competing tradition which saw a distinction in kind between knowledge and belief (compare Pasnau 2017, pp. 43–4).³⁰

My contention is, therefore, that the twentieth-century JTB+ orthodoxy is rooted, historically and theoretically, in the epistemological strand which rejects a primitive contact or presence of reality to the

rather than a clear-cut example (compare Gettier 1963, p. 121 and Le Morvan 2017, pp. 1223–4).

³⁰ I fully agree with Pasnau on the fundamental importance of this shift, but disagree on other key points, notably on what the account of knowledge as ‘reasonable, warranted, justified belief’ is shifting from, and, most importantly, on his regarding ‘reasonable, warranted, justified belief’ as a more satisfactory account of knowledge than the account offered by the rival tradition.

mind. That is, the JTB+ analysis is, ultimately, the child of a sceptical outlook. Uncritically accepting the view that knowledge has been normally conceived as a kind of belief which meets certain criteria is not merely an innocent historical mistake: it is a substantive philosophical position that dismisses without a hearing a vastly important alternative account which has, in fact, dominated the history of Western philosophy. Once a gap between mind and reality is introduced, there is no way to bridge it. I agree with Robert Pasnau's view that much pre-modern epistemology was not primarily concerned with permissible belief, but disagree that this is to be lamented as a Panglossian illusion from which modern times eventually freed us (compare [Pasnau 2017](#)). The heroes of my story are the many thinkers who ground cognition in a primitive perception or an irreducible mental 'grasping' or 'seeing' 'what is', distinct in kind from a mental state in which assent to the object of cognition is not moved by its presence but by a variety of reasons with different degrees of force.

Knowledge First, but Give Belief Its Due! A key implication of my proposal is that, as in the best early modern tradition, the bar for knowledge is set very high. There could be no successful cognition without a primitive contact between mind and reality, but what we know (and can know) is limited because, primarily or paradigmatically, knowledge is akin to acquaintance and, in intellectual cognition, involves understanding.³¹ Its primitive mode is a non-discursive, non-propositional perception that takes the form of both sense-perception, which grounds sensitive knowledge, and intellectual perception, which grounds intellectual knowledge. On this primitive perception of 'what is' are based discursive modes of knowledge in which the evidence of 'what is' is transferred step by step by inference, as well as other cognitive modes such as memory and recognition, in which the original cognitive contact with 'what is' can be preserved (albeit with varying degrees of success).

Belief, on the other hand, is by far the most common mode of our cognition, since assent to the object of cognition which is primitively moved by the perception of 'what is' is possible only in limited cases. Most of our cognitive activity relies on assent given for reasons

³¹ Aristotle's *epistēmē* corresponds to understanding rather than justified true belief (see [Burnyeat 1984](#)). In his insightful discussion, [Carriero \(2013\)](#) stresses that Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Locke are primarily interested in understanding. On the notion of 'primary knowledge', see [Ayers \(2019\)](#), esp. pp. vi, 27, 61–4, 115, 185, 195).

external to the object itself. No amount of reasons or justification supporting such belief will turn this mode of cognition into the ‘cognition of grounds in the object’, to use Kant’s phrase, which characterizes knowledge. On the other hand, *justified* belief is mostly very reliable in tracking truth, and constitutes an essential mode of our successful cognition, with enormous power of extending our cognitive grip beyond what (strictly speaking) can be known.

An obvious objection is that the bar for knowledge is set too high, and that most of what ‘we’ normally take as knowledge will not qualify, including the enormous amount of cognition based on testimony. My first reply is *ad hominem*: those who think that knowledge is a kind of belief are hardly in a position to complain that, on this account, too much of our cognition counts as belief. As in their accounts, I fully acknowledge the difference between mere belief and belief which meets conditions of justification, entitlement, and so on. Only the latter is reliable in tracking truth. Furthermore, I fully acknowledge the force of the shared intuitions which point to the key epistemological difference between Gettiered and not-Gettiered cases of JTB. But, unlike their accounts, I argue for a mental state which is ontologically distinct from *any* sort of belief, whereas for them all our cognition is, at bottom, *some* sort of belief.

Secondly, there is a key social dimension to knowledge that allows us to count as *known by the community* (compare Hyman 1999, p. 433; 2015, p. 159), rather than by each individual in the community, those aspects of ‘what is’ with which some group or individual in the community has, or has had, the kind of cognitive contact required for knowledge. A prime example of this is science. The level of sophistication and specialization in any of the natural sciences is such that no individual scientist can claim to have done, or be able to do by herself, all the experiments, demonstrations, gathering of data, and so on, presupposed by her own scientific work. Much of what a scientist does is based on authority and testimony. However, in so far as there is someone or some group in the scientific community which does have the relevant cognitive contact with ‘what is’, that aspect is *known* by the scientific community collectively although not distributively by each individual member. At the same time, there is a vast amount of scientific work that the scientific community itself regards as driven by hypotheses—that is, epistemically, by justified belief, rather than knowledge—and which plays an indispensable and ineliminable role in scientific progress. Something analogous applies to our everyday

cognition. Say I am upstairs in my study, and you are downstairs looking in the fridge. If you see that there is no milk left, and shout to me, 'We are out of milk!', does this count as knowledge? Well, it depends. On my account, you know that we are out of milk and I have a justified true belief based on your reliable testimony. For all practical purposes (for instance, my going out to buy milk) it makes no difference.³² Most importantly, however, as a family community, we collectively (but not distributively) *know* of the lack of milk in the fridge.

Finally, one of the key aims of my proposal is to stress the crucial contribution to our cognition of a cognitive mode which, I argue, is irreducibly 'other' than knowledge, namely belief. Belief is not something sub-standard in relation to knowledge, because belief has its own standards, namely justification, degrees of probability, level of support by reasons, and so on. It is a different, indispensable, and complementary way to engage cognitively with reality and the world. It seems to me that adult cognition is an inextricable, closely knit fabric of knowledge and belief with different degrees of justification. Acknowledging that much of our cognition relies on belief rather than knowledge makes it even more crucial for belief to meet certain criteria, since no belief is rationally justified without there being reasons which can be given in its support. Conversely, an inflated use of the notion of knowledge often goes hand in hand with fundamentalism and dogmatism (including, but not only, in religious contexts). Knowledge first, but give belief its due!³³

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³² I cannot enter here into a detailed discussion of a well-known issue raised by Plato in the *Meno*, namely, why it is better to know the road to Larissa rather than merely having a true belief about it. I will just say that, although knowledge and true belief may result in the same behaviour in many (but by no means all) cases, in this case my ability to track 'what is' for practical purposes is explained by the fact that someone in the community has or has had a cognitive contact with 'what is'. The latter mode of cognition therefore has ontological and epistemic priority over the former.

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