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You probably think you know a lot of things.

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But do you know what it means to know something?

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We’ve spent quite a bit of time discussing beliefs and knowledge, but we haven’t really

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been specific about what we mean when we talk about those things.

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Thankfully, philosophers love a good definition. They have very specific and lucid ideas in

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mind when they use terms like know or believe or proposition or justification.

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And, about ten minutes from now, you too will know what you’re really saying when you use those words.

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But, just because these terms have been defined, doesn’t mean that philosophers aren’t still arguing over them.

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Because you know, that’s how philosophers do.

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Their definitions might seem kind of obvious at first, but the more you think about them,

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the more nuanced they turn out to be.

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Like, is having knowledge of something the same thing as being correct?

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Or, if you believe something to be true, and it is true, does it matter if your belief in it is justified?

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And can you be right about something without really trying?

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Answers to these questions and more await you, as well as

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cats!

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[Theme Music]

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So you’ve heard this already: Philosophers love a good argument.

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But you’ve figured out by now that philosophers argue in a different way than, like, kindergarten

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kids, or Internet trolls, or other people who confuse “arguing” with sniping back

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and forth or just thinking up witty comebacks.

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Nope. Philosophers have all kinds of rhetorical devices at their disposal that they can use

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to advance an idea, or call into question the ideas of their interlocutors.

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So in order to hold your own in a philosophical debate, you’re gonna have to know the difference

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between two things that sound like exactly the same thing: an assertion, and a proposition.

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And you’ll need to be able to tell whether someone actually knows what they’re talking

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about, or if they just believe what they’re saying might be true.

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For example: The sentence I’m saying right now is an assertion. An assertion is a linguistic

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act – either spoken or written – that has a truth value. And despite what it might

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sound like, truth value isn’t a measure of how right something is. It’s just the

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state of being either true, or false, or indeterminate. All declarative sentences have truth values.

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Declarations that assert something about the past or present are either true or false.

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And assertions about the future are indeterminate, at least when they’re expressed, because

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no one knows if they’re right or not yet.

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For example, I’m gonna assert that “This cat will pee on my desk before the end of the show.”

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That assertion has a truth value, but it’s indeterminate, because the show’s not over yet.

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We’re just gonna have to wait and see.

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Now, all of this contrasts with other kinds of linguistic acts, like questions, which don’t assert anything.

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“This is a cat” is an assertion, as opposed to “Is that a cat?,” which is a linguistic

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act, but not an assertion.

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But the substance of what you assert has a name, too.

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The content of your assertion is your proposition. It’s the underlying meaning of what you’re saying.

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So even though an assertion itself can change, depending on say, what language it’s spoken

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in, its meaning doesn’t change just because its outer packaging does.

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Like, “This is a cat” and “Este es un gato,” both assert the same proposition.

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And a proposition is true if it asserts a claim that corresponds to reality.

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The proposition when I assert “This is a cat,” is true if the object of the “this”

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is in fact a cat, and false if it is anything other than a cat. Like, “This is a cat.”

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It’s worth pointing out that attitude counts, too, when you’re asserting something.

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A speaker’s mental state toward the proposition they’re making is their propositional attitude.

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If I say, like, “This is a cat,” but I actually believe it to be a rat and I’m

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trying to fool you, then philosophers would say that I have a propositional attitude of disbelief.

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Whereas, if I think I’m speaking truthfully, I have a propositional attitude of belief.

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And of course, you’re not going to get very far as a philosopher unless you understand

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the classic definition of belief itself. Based on the lingo you’ve learned so far today,

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belief is just when you take a propositional attitude of truth.

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I believe that this is a cat, if I think it’s true – that is, if my attitude is that the

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assertion corresponds to reality. And even if I’m wrong -- even if there were an aardvark

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on my desk, or if there weren’t a cat on my desk at all, which there isn’t anymore

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-- if I really thought there was a cat on my desk, that would just be my belief.

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My propositional attitude, in other words, is what determines if I have a belief.

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What all this means is that I, like everyone else, can have false beliefs. Simply thinking

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something doesn’t make it correspond to reality, which is what’s needed for truth.

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But of course, the fun of arguing is showing off what you know to other people, or at least

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producing really clever evidence to support your case.

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So, this raises the question of what it means to actually know something, in the philosophical sense.

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The traditional definition of knowledge is that it’s a justified true belief.

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Note that there are three separate components here.

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So, I have knowledge that this is a cat if: I first believe i’s a cat

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And also that it is in fact a cat – that is, my belief corresponds to reality and is

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therefore true. And finally, I can be said to have knowledge about this cat if my belief

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is justified – meaning, I have some sort of legitimate evidence to support my belief.

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Now, we’ve already defined truth and belief. Justification is simply evidence, or other

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support, for your belief. If you remember back to episode 2, you’ll recall that premises

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offer justification for conclusions. And justification can come in a variety of forms. Most often,

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it comes about through testimony – just taking someone’s word for it. Not all testimony

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is strong, or trustworthy, of course. But if it comes from someone who’s an expert

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on the topic in question, you might consider the testimony to be reliable.

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And the fact is, most of what you know about the world, you learned through testimony.

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You took your teachers’ word for it when they were teaching you stuff, and the same

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goes for every book you’ve ever read and every news report you’ve ever seen. They’re

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all just forms of testimony, which you accepted as justification for your knowledge, and your beliefs.

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But justification can come in other forms, too. Another common type is first person observation

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– information you acquire through your senses.

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If I believe that a cat is a cat, because I already have robust and well-informed beliefs

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about cats, then, having had extensive experience with them in the past, I’m identifying the

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cat as a cat through my direct contact with it

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It looks, feels, acts like a cat. Ergo: cat!

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But! Philosophy wouldn’t be any fun if the key to knowledge were that easy, right?

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Until American philosopher Edmund Gettier came along in the 1960s, philosophers were

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in pretty widespread agreement about the definition of knowledge -- that it’s justified true belief.

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Because, you can believe any old thing, but in order to know something, it just makes

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sense that you must also have evidence for your belief, and it must be true. In other

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words, you can have a false belief, but you can’t have false knowledge. And if something

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you thought you knew turns out not to be true, then the fact is, you never actually knew it, you just believed it.

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And likewise, you might happen to hold a true belief, but if you don’t have any justification for it, if you

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just accidentally happened to be right, which happens sometimes – that doesn’t count as knowledge, either.

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Enter Edmund Gettier. Gettier wrote a short but fabulously influential paper that turned

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the standard understanding of knowledge upside down.

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He did this by proposing what came to be known as Gettier cases – situations in which one

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can have justified true belief, but not knowledge.

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Which brings us to this week’s Flash Philosophy! Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

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Here’s one of Gettier’s original cases. Smith and Jones have both applied for the same job.

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The president of the company told Smith that Jones will get the job. This counts as evidence;

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the president of the company would seem to be a reliable source of this information.

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Meanwhile, Smith counts the coins in Jones’ pocket and sees that there are

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ten coins in there. Smith then forms a belief, based on his first person observational evidence

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of the coins, as well as the testimony of the company president.

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He comes to believe that: The person who gets the job has 10 coins in his pocket.

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But, it turns out, the testimony of the president was false, and it’s Smith, not Jones, who gets the job.

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AND, it just so happens, unbeknownst to Smith, that he also has 10 coins in his own pocket.

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So, Smith has a belief – that the person who gets the job has 10 coins in his pocket.

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And that is justified – because he counted Jones’ coins, and the president told him

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Jones was getting the job. And his belief also turns out to be true – the person who

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got the job did have 10 coins in his pocket.

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However, neither pieces of justification actually pointed Smith to the right answer. The president’s

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testimony was wrong, and the 10 coins that he saw were in Jones’ pocket, not his own.

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So it seems Smith simply lucked into being right.

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Gettier argued that we now have a case of justified true belief that is not knowledge.

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As he pointed out, you don’t KNOW something if you simply stumbled into the right answer.

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Thanks Thought Bubble, the philosophical world was turned upside down by this idea, and philosophers

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– loving a good counterexample – began generating their own Gettier cases.

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American philosopher Roderick Chisholm proposed this one:

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Looking across a field, you see an object that looks like a sheep, and you form the

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belief that “there is a sheep in the field.”

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It turns out that the object you see is actually a dog.

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Yet, there is also a sheep, obscured from your vision by a hill.

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So, you have a justified true belief, but the justification for your belief -- the object

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that you saw – is not a sheep. You just lucked into being right.

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Once you understand how it works, it’s pretty easy to generate Gettier cases of your own.

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And many philosophers today think that Gettier successfully destroyed the “justified true belief” definition of knowledge.

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But even though the 1960s might seem long ago to you, remember: philosophers are in

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the business of having millennia-long debates about stuff. So it shouldn’t surprise you

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that the philosophical debate about this is still a-raging.

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But if knowledge is not justified true belief, then…whaaat is it?

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Next time, we will look at one possible answer.

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In the meantime, you learned about some of the key concepts we use when discussing belief

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and knowledge. You learned what defines an assertion and a proposition, and that belief

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is a kind of propositional attitude. We also learned about forms of justification and the

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traditional definition of knowledge, which Edmund Gettier just totally messed with, using his Gettier cases.

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And the cat did not pee on my desk! Because the cat was unable to spend any time at all

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on my desk. So it turns out the assertion that I made was false.

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with the help of these awesome people and our equally fantastic graphics team is Thought Cafe.