ABSTRACT. A satisfactory theory of knowledge in which the shortcomings of a pure externalist account are avoided and in which the Gettier problem is solved should consist in a combination of externalist and internalist components. The internalist component should guarantee that the epistemic subject has cognitive access to the justifying grounds of her belief. And the externalist component should guarantee that the justification of her belief does not depend on any false statement. Keith Lehrer’s coherence theory of knowledge as undefeated justification is an example of such an internalist-externalist analysis of knowledge. But nevertheless, Lehrer’s account leads to unintended results. Therefore, it is argued that a satisfactory coherence theory of knowledge must also be based on a gradual notion of systematic coherence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Analytical epistemologists usually try to answer the question “What is knowledge?” by formulating necessary and sufficient conditions for an epistemic subject possessing knowledge. They try to fill in the blank in the equivalence “S knows that p if and only if . . .” (where S stands for an epistemic subject and p for a proposition). The “standard analysis” of knowledge is often given by the following definitional scheme: 1

DF1 (Standard analysis of knowledge)
S knows that p if and only if:
(i) p is true,
(ii) S believes that p, and
(iii) S's belief that p is epistemically justified.

In order to gain philosophical insight into the nature of knowledge the components of this definition have to be clarified and how these conditions can be satisfied has to be explained.

One of the most important problems concerns the notion of *epistemic justification*. In order to answer the question “What counts as good evidence for a belief?” at least two fundamental distinctions must be taken into
account. The first distinction, the distinction between foundationalism and coherentism, concerns the structure of epistemic justification. A foundationalist claims that there are basic beliefs that are “justified in themselves” or justified “independently of the support of any other belief”. He also claims that all other beliefs are justified with reference to these basic beliefs. Epistemic justification according to foundationalism is a linear inferential process from derived beliefs to basic ones. A coherentist, however, assumes that the structure of justification is not a one-directional inferential process. No epistemically privileged belief exists. All beliefs stand in an inferential relation of justification to other beliefs.

The second distinction, the distinction between internalism and externalism, concerns the question if and to what extent epistemic justification is an internal or an external matter. The most prominent version of internalism is the view that the epistemic subject must have cognitive access to all the justifiers of her true belief. In contrast, pure externalism means that the existence of an external relation between the belief that $p$ and the fact which makes $p$ true turns a true belief into knowledge.

A satisfactory analysis of knowledge should also provide a solution to the so-called “Gettier problem”. In a 1963 article, Edmund Gettier tried to prove the insufficiency of the traditional analysis of the conditions of knowledge. With two counterexamples he indicated that an adequate analysis of knowledge should rule out the possibility of knowledge as a true belief which is justified in a way that depends on luck. The logical structure of his counterexamples can be described as follows: Suppose $S$ believes that $q$ and has strong evidence for $q$. But unfortunately $q$ is false. Suppose further that $S$ infers $p$ from $q$ and $p$ is true. Therefore, $S$ is justified in believing that $p$, and $p$ is true, yet it seems counterintuitive to say that $S$ knows that $p$. A prominent version of a Gettier-type example is Lehrer’s “Mr. Nogot” case: A teacher has strong evidence that her student, Mr. Nogot, owns a Ferrari. She bases her evidence on the facts that Mr. Nogot drives a Ferrari and has a certificate saying that he owns one. From the premiss “Mr. Nogot owns a Ferrari” the teacher deduces: “Some of my students own a Ferrari”. But unsuspected by the teacher, Mr. Nogot deceived her. He does not own a Ferrari. But another student in her class does own a Ferrari, although the teacher has no evidence of this. The teacher has thus the true and justified belief that someone in her class owns a Ferrari. But it seems to be counterintuitive to say that she knows this because it is just a matter of luck that her belief is true. Therefore, the original Gettier examples show that the conditions of knowledge should be specified in a way such that a justified true belief that rests on a false assumption must not count as knowledge.