Linda Zagsebski's 1994 paper, The Inescapability of Gettier Problems, challenges the very foundation of epistemology by claiming that any analysis of knowledge that follows the "justified true belief" model, or even any model that adds a condition to true belief will eventually fall into Gettier-style counterexamples. According to Zagsebski, Gettier problems are not merely rare exceptions to be patched over. Rather, they are inevitable because of the nature in which it typically perceives knowledge. In this essay, I will attempt to explain her main argument, outline the three pathways philosophers can take while responding to this issue, provide an objection that may arise in response to her ultimate conclusion, and finally analyze and assess whether her account or the proposed objection is more convincing.

Zagzebski's Argument: The Structure of Gettier Problems

The author starts her paper with the widely known and accepted fact that knowledge is composed of more than just true belief. Edmund Gettier's 1963 short but compelling piece was successful enough to convince most epistemologists then and now that one can have a belief that is true and justified, but still fail to consist of knowledge. Gettier's originally proposed cases showcased and delivered the notion that a person is capable of arriving at a true belief through a justified process that involved a hidden accident or error. Henceforth, undermining the claim that justified true belief (JTB) is sufficient for knowledge. As Zagzebski writes, "Gettier problems arise in the theory of knowledge when it is only by chance that a justified true belief is true" (p. 65).

Zagzebski's contribution is especially crucial because of her particular claim that any account of knowledge that includes a truth condition and a justification, will be vulnerable to Gettier cases. She argues that the issue is within the structure of justification as a component

itself. If justification as a component does not guarantee truth, but is meant to be connected to it closely, there will be cases where someone arrives at the truth by accident or by sheer luck. Even though there may be the presence of a rational belief forming process. She says in her piece “an accident of bad luck is cancelled out by an accident of good luck…” (p. 66). Hence, these are cases that are labelled as Gettier cases as primarily introduced by Edmund Gettier in his 1963 piece.

To demonstrate how these cases may arise and are actually far more prevalent in everyday life than one would assume, Zagzebski proposes and outlines a general instruction for constructing a Gettier case. She says to start with a case of a justified false belief, then modify the case by introducing a second element of luck that makes the belief true. However, she highlights that this new element must be independent of the subject’s justification. Lastly, the result of the case should be a belief that is true and justified, however not a knowledge.

This instruction showcases that gettier cases applied to both internalist and externalist theories. Whether one defines justification in terms of internal mental states (internalism), reliable processes (reliabilism), or even “warrant” as Alvin Plantinga does, Gettier cases are still likely to be created. In her words, “ It makes no difference if the component of knowledge in addition to true belief is identified as something other than justification….” (p. 65). Zagzebski showcases this through the examples of the fake barn case and the Mary misidentifying her husband case. The fake barn case is a case which is closely tied to reliabilism and Mary’s case is in regards to Platinga’s theory. In each case, the subject does satisfy the JTB theory, however their beliefs are only true by mere coincidence or luck.

The Three Options for Responding to Gettier Problems

Zagzebski outlines three main and general responses that epistemologists can choose to use in recognizing the inevitability and inescapability of Gettier problems. The first response is catered around the notion that one can eliminate the independence between Justification and Truth. This is possible by defining justification in such a strict manner that no form of false belief can be ever justified. Unfortunately, such an attempt would lead the concept of truth to become redundant. Therefore, knowledge would become justified belief and the concept of truth would be built into justification. A very few handful of philosophers find this option plausible. The second response is where one can accept the presence of luck in knowledge. In simple terms, knowledge can be redefined as a form that allows luck to play a greater role than it already does. Therefore, agreeing that it is possible for people to sometimes acquire knowledge by accident. This approach, however, threatens to make the concept of knowledge uninformative and trivial. Hence this leads to the third and final response, where Zagzebski says to incorporate luck into the very definition of knowledge. According to her, this is the most promising option that explicitly acknowledges that knowledge requires in fact the absence of luck. In other words, a concrete and proper definition of knowledge must rule out accidental truths, even in cases where belief is otherwise justified. This leads to more complex conditions involving "anti-luck" constraints or "defeasibility" requirements. However, all these strategies still do fall short in a lot of situations.

An Objection: Is Knowledge Really So Demanding

One objection to Zagzebski's conclusion comes from epistemologists who argue that her conception of knowledge is too strict. Such criticism suggests that the demand to eliminate all

luck from the acquisition of knowledge is unrealistic and misaligned with how we use the term "knowledge" in ordinary contexts. For instance, if we say, "I know that it's going to rain tomorrow", we do not necessarily mean that our belief lacks all epistemic luck. Rather, we are of the opinion that our belief is well-supported and likely to be true.

In this view, knowledge is a fallible and useful epistemic category. Minor elements of luck cannot disqualify something from being knowledge, as long as the justification is strong and the belief is true. In fact, if all factors of luck are eliminated, then we might reach upon a concept of knowledge that is so demanding that only a few real-world beliefs qualify. Hence, such an action would result in a term that is rather overly idealized and useless. Therefore, ultimately detaching it from practical reasoning and communication. Thus, this acknowledges that justification and truth are not meant to perfectly align, and holds the idea that this imperfection does not necessarily undermine the utility of the concept. In short, some luck can be tolerable.

Assessment: Whose View Is More Convincing

I ultimately find Zagzebski's position in this argument more persuasive. The main issue is not whether people use the word "knowledge" in ordinary context despite some degree of luck. However, it is the concern whether our philosophical understanding of knowledge is able to coherently accommodate Gettier style cases without surrendering to inconsistency.

Zagzebski convincingly implores and establishes the notion that Gettier cases involve a structural flaw in all "true belief + x" models. The continued usage of such models without addressing the problem of epistemic luck risks the endorsement of cases where someone's belief is true, possibly only by accident. That, to me, is not necessarily genuine knowledge.

Knowledge, in its intrinsic nature, must have a successful connection between truth and belief. A connection that is not accidental by any means.

Even more so, a possible redefining of knowledge weakens the philosophical rigor of the concept. The epistemic value of knowledge diminishes if knowledge is gained just as easily through coincidence as through rational inquiry. Thus, demands a concept of knowledge that distinguishes it from lucky guessing. Zagzebski's account highlights why such a distinction is necessary.

Even more so, in no way or form does Zagzebski's account claim for perfect certainty. Rather, she hints that any theory of knowledge must deal with the unavoidable gap between truth and justification. Her emphasis on the necessity of excluding luck is not designed to achieve unattainable perfection, but rather a call for more precise epistemic standards. That being said, the objection also offers a necessary reminder that in everyday discourse, people often do not adhere to such strict epistemic criteria. However, the observation also only provides support to the idea that there is a tension between philosophical analysis and ordinary language. Resolvement of this issue requires refinement and not the abandonment of conceptual tools.