

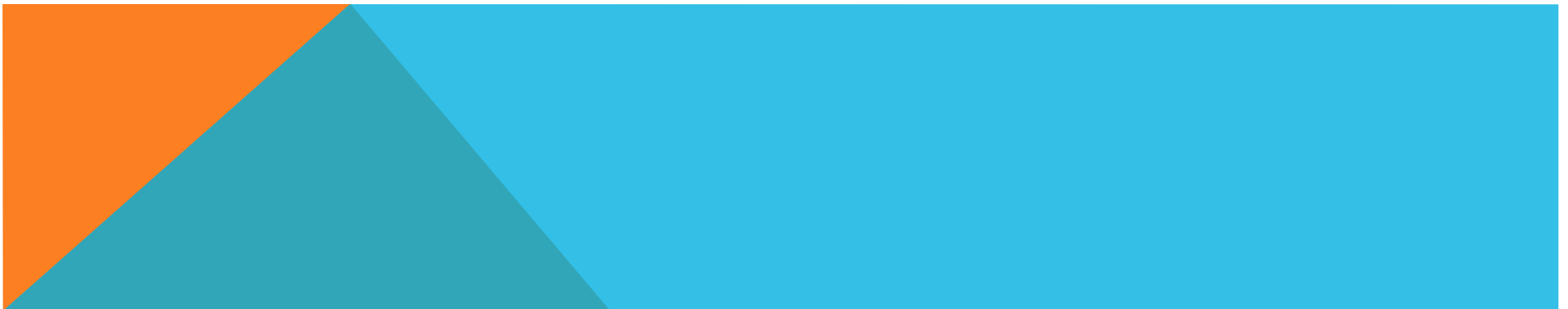
**INTRODUCTION TO  
PHILOSOPHY**

PROFESSOR DUNCAN PRITCHARD

# TOPIC 5

## EPISTEMOLOGY

- ❑ Epistemology is an area of philosophy which is concerned with knowledge and cognate notions, such as truth, rationality (epistemic) justification, understanding, wisdom, and so on.
- ❑ Knowledge, or at least some forms of knowledge (such as wisdom), has often been claimed to be an essential component of a good life, a life of flourishing.



# PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Propositional knowledge, or knowledge-that, is different from ability knowledge (know-how) or acquaintance knowledge.

One can know a proposition only if:

- (i) That proposition is true;
- (ii) One believes that proposition.

There is more to knowledge than mere true belief (i.e., 'getting it right'), however.



# TWO INTUITIONS ABOUT KNOWLEDGE

## *The Ability Intuition*

Knowledge is getting it right through one's ability.

## *The Anti-Luck Intuition*

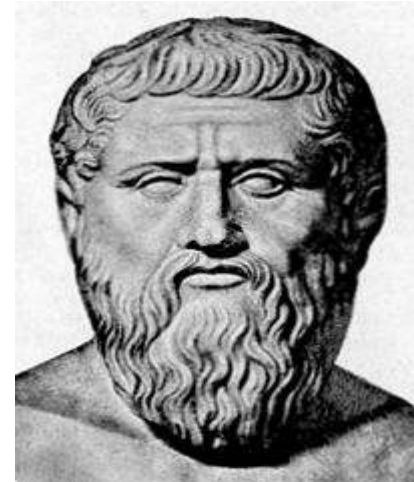
Knowledge is getting it right in a non-lucky way.



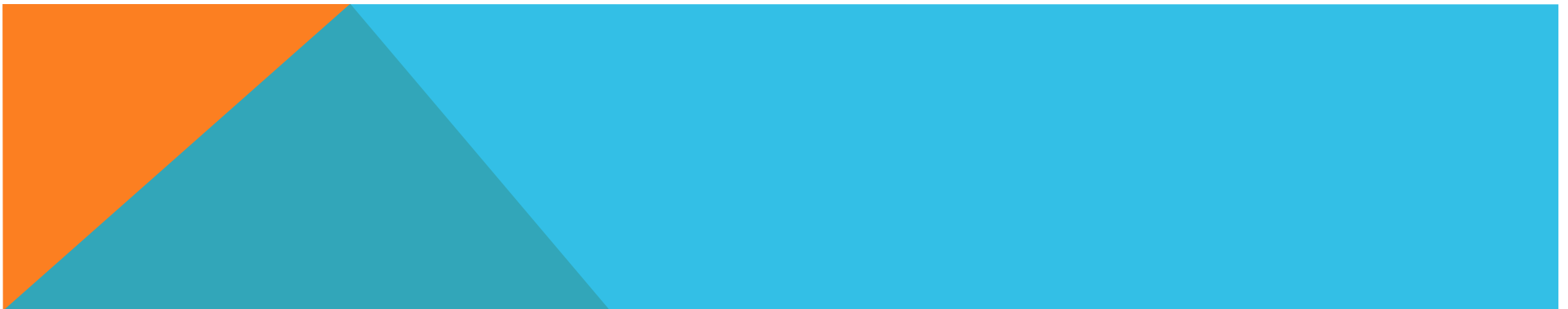
# THE CLASSICAL ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE

One can know a proposition if, only if:

- (i) That proposition is true;
- (ii) One believes that proposition;
- (iii) One's belief is justified.



Plato (c. 427-347)



# GETTIER COUNTEREXAMPLES

- ❑ Examples of justified true belief (and thus of getting it right through one's ability) where the true belief is too lucky to count as knowledge.
- ❑ *The Stopped Clock*
  - (i) You believe that the time is 7.28am.
  - (ii) You have good reason to believe that the time is 7.28am.
  - (iii) It is true that it is 7.28am.
  - (iv) But you don't know that it's 7.28am because, unbeknownst to you, what you are looking at is a stopped clock.



Edmund Gettier (b. 1927)



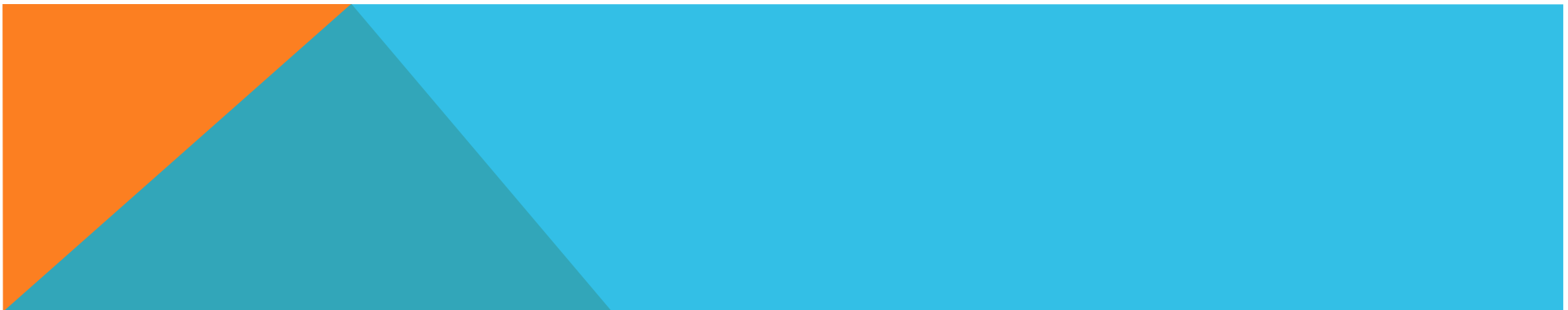
# GETTIER COUNTEREXAMPLES

## □ *The Sheep*

- (i) You believe that there is a sheep in the field in front of you.
- (ii) You have good reason to believe that there is a sheep in the field in front of you.
- (iii) It is true that there is a sheep in the field in front of you.
- (iv) But you don't know that there is a sheep in the field in front of you because, unbeknownst to you, what you are looking at is a big sheep-shaped rock which is obscuring from view a sheep hidden behind.



Edmund Gettier (b. 1927)



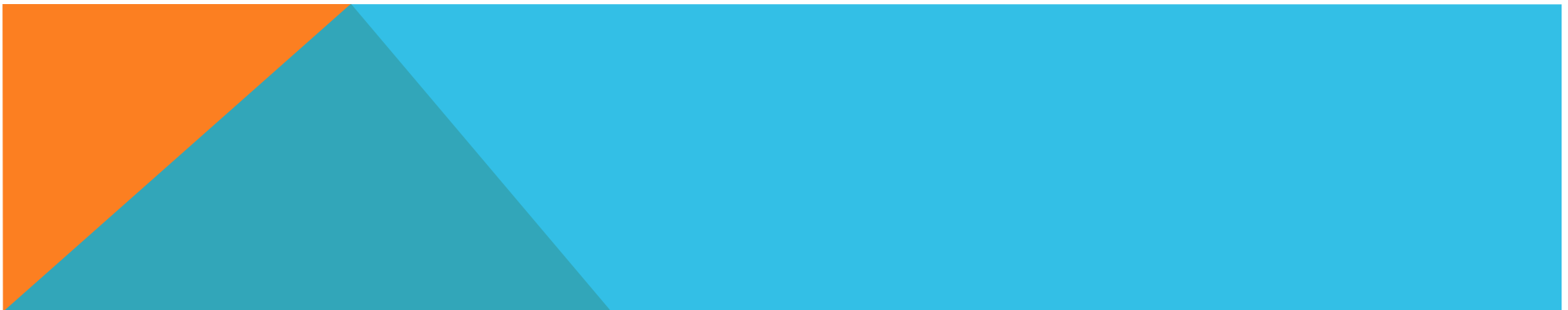
# GETTIER COUNTEREXAMPLES

## □ *The Barn Façade*

- (i) You believe that there is a barn in front of you.
- (ii) You have good reason to believe that there is a barn in front of you.
- (iii) It is true that there is a barn in front of you.
- (iv) But you don't know that there is a barn in front of you because, unbeknownst to you, you are in barn façade county in which nearly all the barn-shaped objects are fakes.



Edmund Gettier (b. 1927)





# THE GETTIER FORMULA

## ☐ *Step One*

Take a belief that is formed in such a way that it would usually result in a false belief, but which is justified nonetheless.

## ☐ *Step Two*

Make the belief true, albeit true for reasons that have nothing to do with the agent's justification.



# SOME QUESTIONS RAISED BY GETTIER CASES

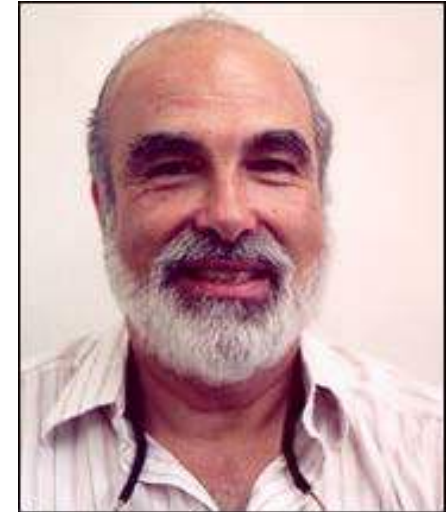
- Is justification even necessary for knowledge?
- How does one go about eliminating knowledge-undermining epistemic luck?
- Would a life lacking in knowledge solely in virtue of Gettier-style epistemic luck be lacking in value in any fundamental way (cf. achievements more generally)?



# NO FALSE LEMMAS

One can know a proposition if, only if:

- (i) That proposition is true;
- (ii) One believes that proposition;
- (iii) One's belief is justified;
- (iv) One's belief is not based on any false assumptions.

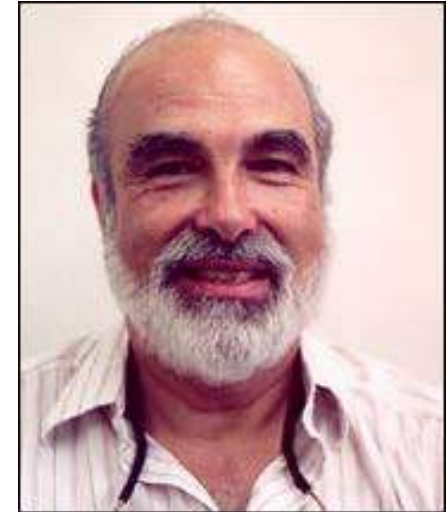


Keith Lehrer, b. 1936

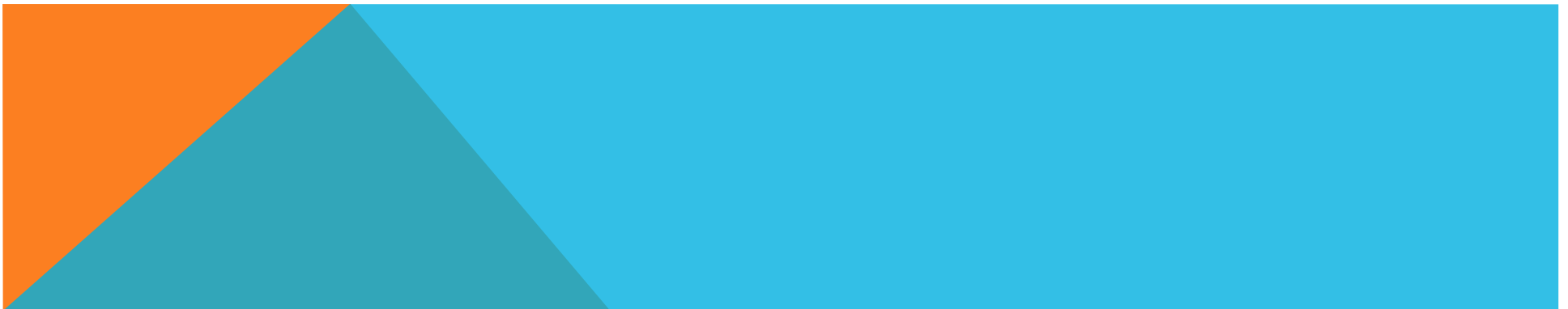


# CONTRA NO FALSE LEMMAS

- ❑ Not all Gettier-style cases seem to involve lemmas.
- ❑ Lots of genuine knowledge seems to depend, in part, on a false lemma.
- ❑ More generally, it is hard to find a principled way of understanding what counts as a lemma in this context which is not (i) so broad as to disallow genuine knowledge, or (ii) so narrow that it includes fake knowledge.



Keith Lehrer, b. 1936



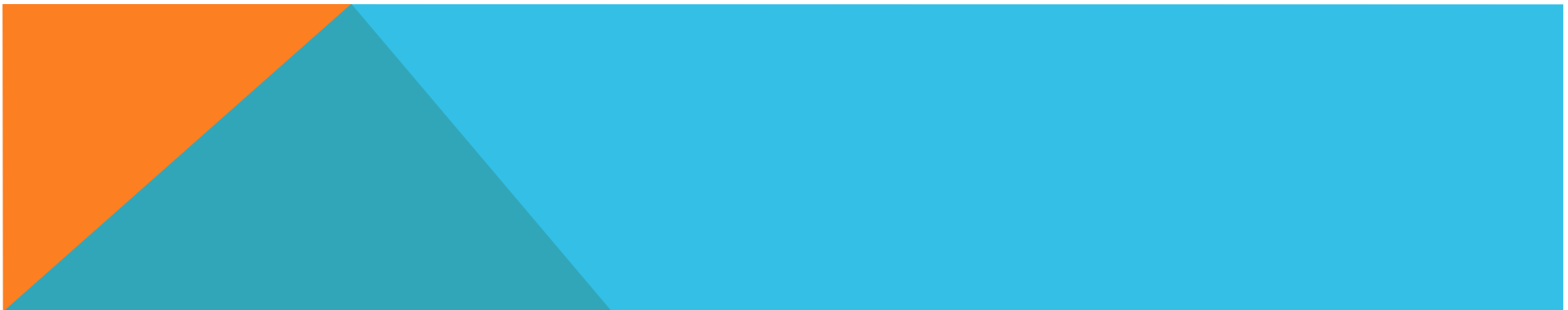
# THE VALUE OF TRUE BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

- ❑ Knowledge seems to be something that is very valuable. But if so, why?
- ❑ One answer to this question focusses on the value of true belief. True belief seems to be at least instrumentally valuable, in that it helps us to achieve our practical goals.
- ❑ So if knowledge entails true belief, then we can potentially explain the value of knowledge by appeal to the instrumental value of true belief.



# THE VALUE OF TRUE BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

- ❑ But what is the nature of this instrumental value? After all, it's not the case that all true beliefs are valuable, as some of them are pointless (e.g., the number of grains of sand on the beach), and some of them may be harmful to us (e.g., it may be that being unaware of just how much danger I am presently in is key to me safely navigating my way out of it).
- ❑ At most, then, we can say that true belief is *generally* instrumentally valuable (or that it is the kind of thing that is instrumentally valuable).
- ❑ But this means that we are also similarly limited in what we can say about the value of knowledge.
- ❑ Moreover, if the value of knowledge just concerns the value of the truth component, then we have no way of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

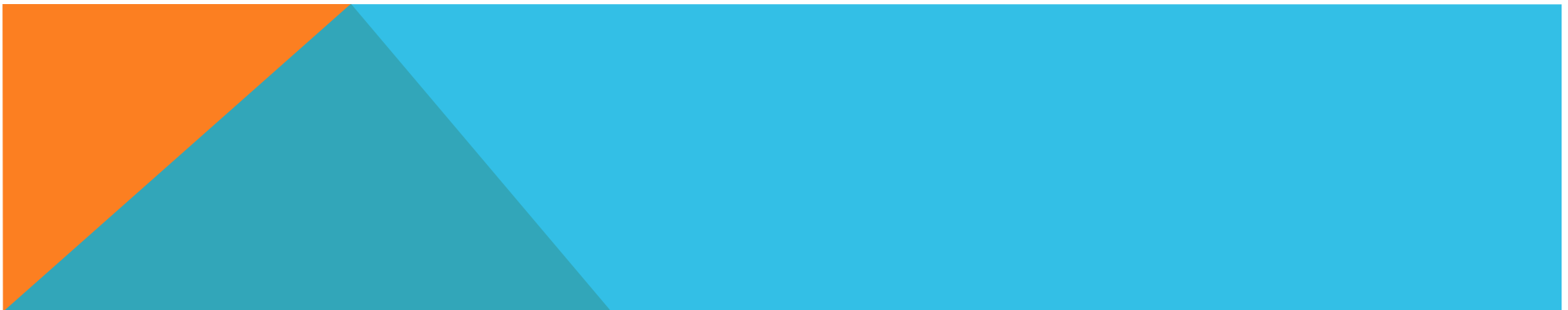


# THE STATUES OF DAEDALUS

- ❑ In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates answers this problem by arguing that the greater value of knowledge over true belief relates to the fact that it has a stability that mere true belief lacks.
- ❑ In this regard he makes a comparison with the statues of Daedalus, which were thought so life-like that they would run away if left untethered. Knowledge, says, Socrates, is tethered true belief that does not easily 'run away'.



Daedalus



# THE STATUES OF DAEDALUS

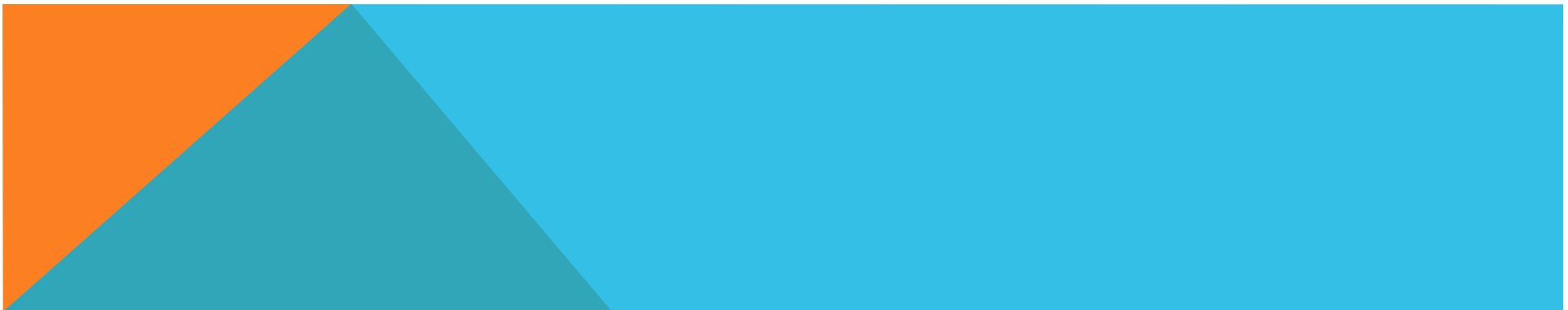
- ❑ Consider Plato's example of the road to Larissa.
- ❑ If one's true belief is based on guesswork, then if the road takes an unexpected turn one will lose one's confidence that one is heading the right way.
- ❑ But if one knows that this is the right way to go—one has seen the route on a reliable map, say—then one is less likely to lose one's true belief about the way to go.
- ❑ Knowledge thus tends to have more practical, instrumental value than mere true belief.





# THE FINAL VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

- ❑ Is it enough to argue that knowledge tends to be of greater instrumental value than mere true belief? For don't we in addition think that knowledge is at least sometimes valuable in a way that differs in kind, and not merely degree, from mere true belief? Isn't knowledge at least sometimes precious? This suggests that knowledge might have a final value that mere true belief lacks.
- ❑ Think about the good life, the life of flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Isn't that a life that is in part characterised by the possession of knowledge? (Could one lead a good life and yet be systematically Gettierised, for example?)
- ❑ Wisdom, in particular—including what the ancient Greeks called practical wisdom (*phronesis*)—seems to be a crucial ingredient in a good life. Moreover, it seems to be finally valuable, in that its value doesn't depend on whether it happens to be practically useful.



# RADICAL SCEPTICISM

- ❑ Radical scepticism is the view that knowledge (at least of the world around us) is impossible.
- ❑ Given that knowledge is a vital part of a good life, a life of flourishing (and of authenticity), then radical scepticism is a threat to *eudaimonia*. (Though interestingly in ancient thought there was one form of scepticism, known as Pyrrhonian scepticism, which thought that this was the route to *eudaimonia*).
- ❑ Sceptics make use of *radical sceptical hypotheses*, scenarios where everything is as it usually appears to be, but where we are being radically deceived.
- ❑ The sceptic says that we cannot rule-out sceptical hypotheses, and thus argues that we are unable to know anything about the world around us.



# BIV RADICAL SCEPTICISM

- (S1) I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat.
- (S2) If I don't know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat, then I don't know very much.
- (SC) I don't know very much.

What motivates (S1)?

By hypothesis, I can't tell the difference between ordinary experience and envatted experience.



# BIV RADICAL SCEPTICISM

- ❑ But even if we don't know that we're not brains-in-vats, so what?
- ❑ But if you were a brain-in-a-vat, then you wouldn't have hands (since brains-in-vats are handless by definition). So how do you know that you have hands?
- ❑ (And if you don't know this, what do you know?)



Is that you in there?



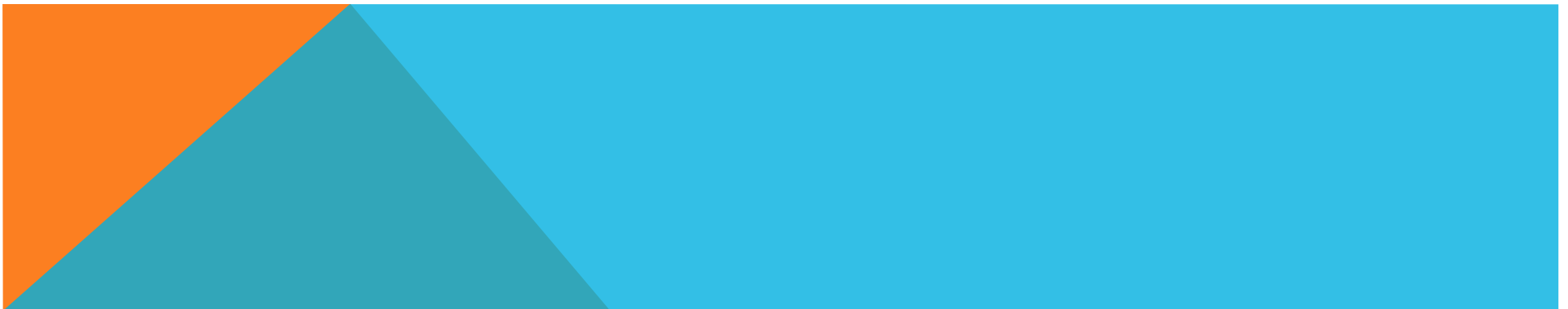
# THE CLOSURE PRINCIPLE

- ❑ *Closure*: If you know one proposition, and you know it entails a second proposition, then you know that second proposition too.
- ❑ So, if I do know that I have hands, then I must know that I am not a (handless) BIV.
- ❑ Conversely, if I don't know that I'm not a BIV, then I don't know that I have hands (and much else besides).



# RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES

- ❑ A natural response to the problem of radical scepticism is to say that radical sceptical hypotheses are not *relevant* alternatives, in the way that normal error-possibilities are, in virtue of being so far-fetched.
- ❑ But making this claim stick is difficult. On what grounds is one to differentiate between relevant and non-relevant alternatives that doesn't simply beg the question against the sceptic?
- ❑ Relatedly, is the idea that closure should go (that seems to be the implication of this move)? If so, what justifies this move?

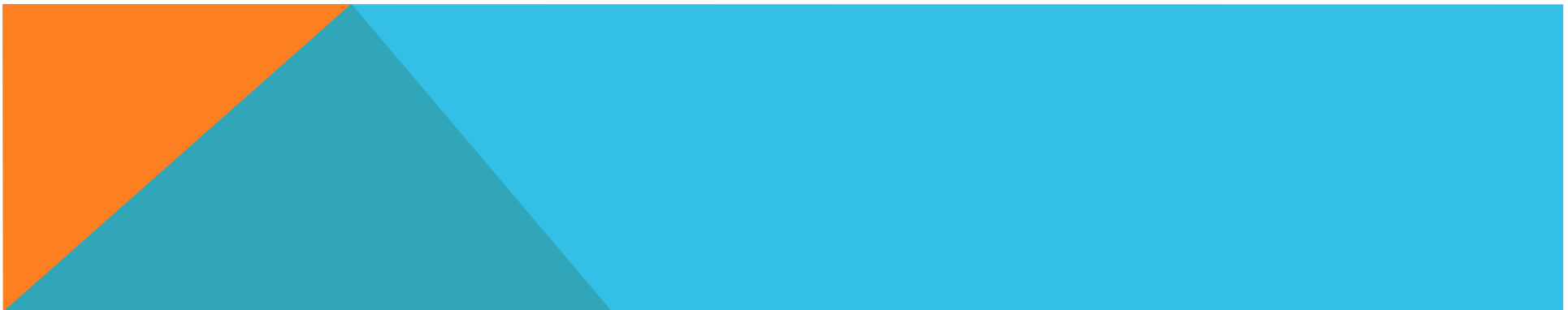


# THE SENSITIVITY PRINCIPLE

- ❑ *Sensitivity*: When one knows that  $p$ , one's belief that  $p$  is sensitive to the truth that  $p$ , where this means that had  $p$  not been true, then one wouldn't have believed that  $p$ .
- ❑ Notice how sensitivity can effectively deal with Gettier-style cases.
- ❑ But it also plausibly gives us a rationale to deny the closure principle, since while one's everyday beliefs are usually sensitive, one's beliefs in the denials of sceptical hypotheses are by their nature insensitive.
- ❑ But is the sensitivity principle more plausible than closure (and, properly understood, does it really entail the denial of the latter anyway)?



Fred Dretske (1932-2013)



# MOOREANISM

- ❑ G. E Moore famously responded to scepticism by arguing that where philosophy and commonsense come into conflict, one can legitimately go with the latter.
- ❑ Applied to our sceptical argument, a Moorean response would thus involve claiming that one can just as well use closure to infer knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses as one can use closure to deny that one has everyday knowledge, as the sceptic does (one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*).



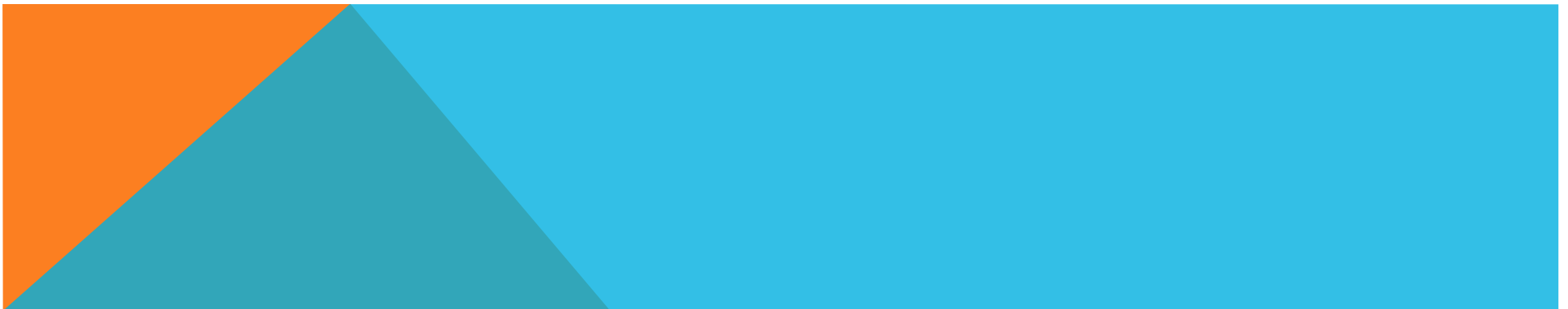
G. E. Moore (1873-1958)





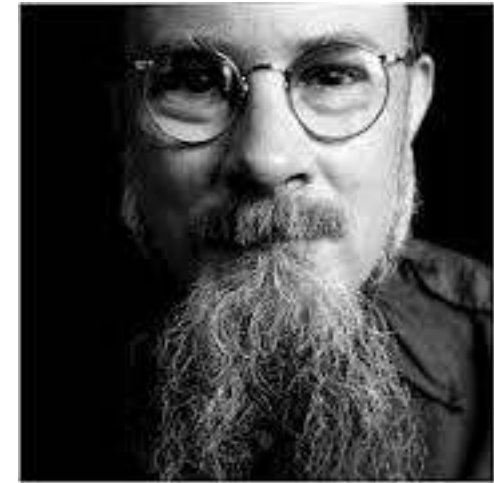
# THE SAFETY PRINCIPLE

- ❑ But arguing that the anti-sceptic wins draws with the sceptic, which is effectively what Mooreanism amounts to, isn't very intellectual satisfying.
- ❑ Rather, we need a rationale for explaining how we can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses.
- ❑ One such rationale is the *safety principle*.
- ❑ *Safety*: If one has knowledge that  $p$ , then one couldn't easily be wrong about  $p$ .



# CONTEXTUALISM

- ❑ Could it be that ‘knowledge’ is a context-sensitive notion, in the way that ‘flat’ or ‘empty’ is? If so, could it be that the sceptic is illicitly raising the standards for when one counts as having knowledge?
- ❑ Suppose I say ‘the table is flat’, and a physicist walks in and says ‘nothing is flat’. We could both be speaking truly—in the former case because I have an everyday standard for flatness in mind, in the latter case because the scientist is using an absolute standard for flatness.
- ❑ Could the same be true of ‘knowledge’ (i.e., in that we speak truly when we ordinarily ascribe knowledge to ourselves, but that the sceptic also speaks truly in denying that we have knowledge)?

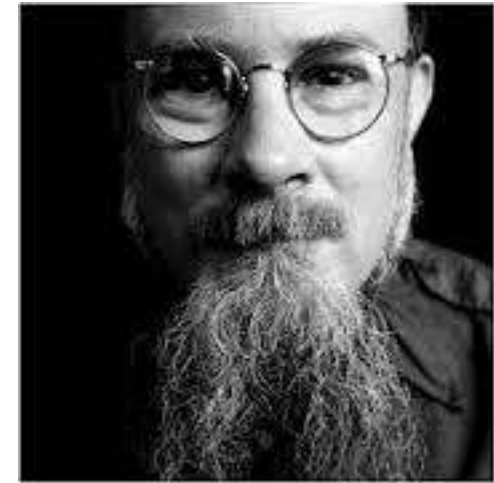


David Lewis  
(1941-2001)



# CONTEXTUALISM

- ❑ This idea is superficially very attractive, particularly since on this view you don't need to deny the closure principle (since there is no single context in which the antecedent of the closure inference and the consequent of the closure inference both express a truth). But it faces some problems.
- ❑ For one thing, how plausible is it that this age-old problem simply turns on a failure to notice that 'knows' is a context-sensitive term?
- ❑ But the more serious difficulty is that scepticism doesn't seem to be about standards at all, in that if the sceptic is right then we lack any rational basis at all for our knowledge. Thus one can lower the everyday standards for knowledge as much as one likes, and we still wouldn't count as having any.



David Lewis  
(1941-2001)

