

The Gettier Problem

What follows is a summary of Gettier's 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', 1963.

The traditional view of propositional knowledge (S knows that p) held that knowledge is constituted by beliefs that are both true and justified. It can be outlined in the following form:

(A) S knows that p if and only if...

- (i) p is true**
- (ii) S believes that p, and**
- (iii) S is justified in believing that p.**

The Gettier Problem challenges this traditional view. It set the stage for epistemology in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Problem

Gettier provides a challenge to the tripartite analysis of knowledge. Gettier presents us with two cases in which justified true beliefs are not instances of knowledge. Therefore the traditional analysis is insufficient for explicating the concept of knowledge.

Before he presents the two cases, he notes that two assumptions are required:

- (1) 'It is possible for a person, S, to believe in a false proposition'.
- (2) 'For any proposition P, if S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q' (Gettier, 2009 [1963], p.61).

* It should be noted that propositional knowledge can be non-inferential or inferential. Much of our knowledge is inferential knowledge. The cases Gettier presents are counterexamples to inferential knowledge.

Case 1

Smith and Jones have applied for a job. Smith has strong evidence for the following proposition:

(a) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has 10 coins in his pocket.

This proposition entails proposition (b), which is as follows:

(b) The man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket.

Smith sees that (a) entails (b), and accepts (b) on the grounds of (a), for which he has strong evidence. It seems then that Smith is justified in believing that (b) is true.

Let us now suppose that, and unknown to Smith, Smith will get the job and Smith has 10 coins in his pocket. (b) is true, and Smith believes justifiably that (b) is true.

However, Smith does not *know* that (b) is true, for it is true by virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, and by virtue of Smith getting the job, but Smith does not know how many coins are in his pocket and falsely believes that Jones will get the job.

Having a justified true belief then, in this case, is not sufficient for knowledge.

Case 2

Smith has evidence for the following proposition:

(c) Jones own a Ford.

Smith has a friend, Brown. He does not know where Brown is. Smith then constructs the following propositions:

(d) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston.

(e) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.

(f) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Brest-Litovsk.

Smith sees that (d), (e) and (f) are all entailed by (c), and he goes on to accept (d), (e) and (f) on the basis that they are

inferred from (c). Smith then is justified in believing all of these three propositions.

Let us now imagine that, in spite of Smith's belief, Jones in fact does not own a Ford — he has merely rented a Ford or borrowed one. And further imagine that Brown just happens to be in Boston. (d) is true, and Smith believes justifiably that (d) is true.

However, Smith does not *know* that (d) is true. His belief in (d) is based on his false belief that Jones owns a Ford. Thus even though the *supposed* conditions for knowledge of (d) are fulfilled, Smith does not have knowledge of (d).

As such, this is another case in which having a justified true belief does not appear to be sufficient for knowledge.

Given the problem raised for the traditional analysis of knowledge, how are we to understand the concept of knowledge?

References

E. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge', in J. Cottingham, *Western Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009). First published in *Analysis*, Vol.23, 1963, pp.121-23.

READING FOR STUDENTS

Essential

- E. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge', *Analysis*, Vol.23, 1963, pp.121-23.
- Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing Called Knowledge?* (London and NY: Routledge, 2006), ch.3.

Recommended

- Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, and Matthias Steup, 'The Analysis of Knowledge', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis>, on 18/07/13.

Further

- Linda Zagzebski, 'What is Knowledge?', *The Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, edited by John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).