

SESSION SIX

EPISTEMIC LUCK AND FALLIBILITY

Can the standard account be repaired?

Given the problem raised by the tripartite analysis of knowledge, how are we to understand the concept of knowledge? Gettier inspired a great deal of work by philosophers attempting to find a working definition of knowledge. In response to Gettier cases, philosophers have tried to add one or more clauses to the traditional analysis in an attempt to bridge the gap between knowledge and justified true belief in such a way that the definition of knowledge is not subject to the Gettier problem. We should note that even if we assume that some justified true beliefs do not count as knowledge, it does not follow, from the Gettier cases, that all justified true beliefs should be excluded from counting as such. In reality, these sorts of cases are probably few and far between. But if one wants to understand knowledge in all cases, not just some, then the Gettier problem needs to be taken seriously. Indeed, for many epistemologists, Gettier's paper drove home the point that the standard analysis is too weak, for Gettier has effectively showed that we can have substantial grounds for believing something yet still be correct only by accident (Unger, 1968). If we want to understand knowledge in all cases, it would help if we could understand what it is that leads us to say that, in the Gettier cases, the justified true beliefs in question do not constitute knowledge, for if we can be clear about what makes these cases Gettier ones, this may enable us to pinpoint what would suffice for those cases *not* to be Gettier cases (Hetherington, 2005).

Responses to Gettier cases

There are two characteristic features of the Gettier cases:

1. **Fallibility:**
Smith's justifications for his beliefs are fallible. In Case 1, Smith basis his belief on good but fallible evidence. This is also true of Case 2.
2. **Luck:**
Smith's justified beliefs are true largely because of luck. In Case 2, for example, Jones just happens to be Boston, and in Case 1, Smith himself just happens to have 10 coins in his pocket. In both cases, Smith's beliefs are correct, but only by accident. There is a certain flukiness involved.

The question now is whether removing one of these features from an analysis of knowledge would allow us to formulate an analysis that is not subject to the Gettier problem.

Eliminating fallibility

Peter Unger presents an argument that certainty is a requirement for knowledge. His argument is often interpreted as a requirement for infallibility. For Unger, a person can be said to know something only if she is certain of it. To say “He knows that it is raining, but he isn’t certain of it” is to state an inconsistent statement (Unger, 1971, p.216). Unger further argues that there is hardly anything of which we are certain, and this leads him to claim that there is hardly anything which we can be said to know. (For replies to Unger see James Cargile, ‘In Reply to ‘A Defense of Skepticism’’, in *Philosophical Review*, Vol.81, 1972, pp.229-36, reprinted in *Essays in Knowledge and Justification*, eds. George Pappas and Marshall Swain (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp.337-45; David Lewis, ‘Elusive Knowledge’, in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.74, No.4, 1996, pp.549-67; and Fred Dretske, ‘The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge’ in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol.40, 1981, pp.363-78.)

In the Gettier examples, saying that knowledge requires certain evidence would rule out the assumption that Jones would get the job, as it would the assumption that Jones owns a Ford. As such, adding a clause that stated that knowledge requires certainty or infallibility could make the standard account of knowledge ‘Gettier-proof’. However, such a clause would make it very difficult for anyone to possess knowledge. As Unger notes, saying knowledge requires certainty leads to scepticism about almost anything we claim to know. Would such a requirement would be workable in reality? Humans are not infallible, so it is not clear that the certainty condition is one that could be met most of the time.

Eliminating epistemic luck

Many accounts of epistemic luck define it in terms of that which we know by accident (see, for example, William Harper, 1996; and Unger, 1968). Peter Unger, for example, argues that ‘a man knows that p if and only if it is not an accident that the man is right about its being the case that p ’ (1968, p.161). Whilst allowing for the accidental with regards to ‘the occurrence or existence of the fact known’, he claims that ‘in my analysis of ... knowledge, a complete absence of the accidental is claimed... only as regards a certain relation concerning the man and the fact. Thus, it may be accidental that p and a man may know that p , for it may nevertheless be that it is not at all accidental that the man is right about its being the case that p ’ (Unger, 1968, p.159). For Unger, then, justified belief is not knowledge if it is true by virtue of some relevant accident.

Perhaps, then, epistemic luck can be appealed to as the reason why the justified true beliefs in the Gettier cases do not count as knowledge, and perhaps eliminating such luck would permit us to say that a justified true belief counts as knowledge. One problem with proposals that attempt to eliminate epistemic luck is that all knowledge, to a certain extent, is dependent upon luck. It may be that, in respect of the Gettier cases, it is not luck itself that prevents the justified true beliefs counting as knowledge, but too much luck. But the question then remains as to how much luck is too much (Hetherington, 2005).

Other proposed solutions:

i. Eliminating false evidence

Some epistemologists argue that the Gettier cases do not count as knowledge because the justified true beliefs in these cases are based on false evidence. In Case 1, Smith's conclusion is based on the false belief that Jones will get the job. In Case 2, his conclusions are based on the false belief that Jones owns a Ford. If Jones had not accepted as true the evidence for these beliefs, then he would not have gone on to infer the conclusions that he did. Perhaps, then, for a justified true belief to count as knowledge it must be based on evidence that is not false.

This solution has been proposed by a number of philosophers, including, for example, G. Meyers and Kenneth Stern who claim that Gettier cases 'turn on the principle that someone can be justified in accepting a certain proposition *h* on evidence *p* even though *p* is false' (1973, p.147). For Meyers and Stern, 'it is a necessary condition for being justified in believing a nonbasic statement that one's reasons be true. Thus, if *S* derives *h* from *p* where *p* is false, *S* is not justified in believing that *h* even though he believes that *p* and is justified in so believing and even though *h* does indeed follow from *p*' (1973, p.156). In other words, they argue that a proposition, *p*, can only be used to justify another proposition, *h*, if *p* is true. (For a response to the 'eliminate false evidence' proposal, see Richard Feldman, 'An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counter-Examples', in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 52, No.1, 1974, pp. 68-69. Feldman claims that eliminating false evidence would not make all knowledge immune from the Gettier problem.)

One problem with this proposal is that, like the proposal to eliminate infallibility, it could lead to skepticism. We acquire our beliefs in a number of ways, and how we acquire those beliefs is not always something we can control. It would be a difficult if not nigh-on impossible task to pinpoint the sources of our beliefs to see if those sources are reliable. Indeed, it is far from clear that we could eliminate false evidence from all our beliefs. But if this is what we have to do if they are to count as knowledge, then it seems that there will be very little that we can claim to know. Perhaps then this proposal is too demanding (Hetherington, 2005).

ii. Removing problematic reasoning

Instead of thinking in terms of false evidence, would it help to think in terms of reasoning that moves through a false step? Think about the reasoning that leads to the belief the Jones owns a Ford. Smith infers that Jones owns a Ford merely from the fact that he has seen Jones driving around in a Ford, and this fact is not a sufficient basis upon which to make such an inference. As such, we could say that his reasoning here appears to have gone through a false step. Perhaps, then, we could say that a justified true belief can be counted as knowledge if and only if that belief is not based on an inference that involves false steps.

However, Gettier-like cases have been described where your reasoning does not seem to proceed through any false steps at all, but where the justified true belief in question

does not count as knowledge. Imagine, for example, that you are in a field, and you see a rock which looks like a sheep. You say to yourself, “There’s a sheep in this field”, and you believe this to be true. However, although there is in fact a sheep in the field, you cannot see it. It is behind a tree. So it would seem that you have a justified true belief that there is a sheep in the field, but most would say that your belief fails to count as knowledge. Indeed, you do not really *know* that there is a sheep in the field (Chisholm 1989, p.93). But in this case you do not seem to have reasoned through any false steps. Actually, your belief that there is sheep in the field is a perceptual belief that appears to be formed non-inferentially. So saying that the reasoning that leads one to a true belief should not proceed through false steps (if that belief is to count as knowledge) does not seem to be an adequate response to the Gettier problem.

The above responses are just some of the proposed solutions to Gettier’s challenge. We have seen how these approaches are not without their problems. In the late twentieth century, epistemologists began to express doubt about ever overcoming the Gettier problem (see, for example, Linda Zagzebski, ‘The Inescapability of Gettier Problems’, 1994). Some philosophers argued that whether one can be said to know that *p* is bound up with circumstances and context, so that the context will determine whether a belief counts as knowledge. In some contexts the standards required for knowledge will be hard to meet; and where epistemic standards are high, it will be quite difficult to say that we know something or other. In other contexts, epistemic standards are lower, and it is much easier for our beliefs to count as knowledge as long as we accept that we can attain knowledge in such contexts only with varying degrees of probability. (For contextualist solutions, see, for example, Keith DeRose, ‘Solving the Skeptical Problem’, in Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (eds.), *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Stewart Cohen, ‘Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons’, in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 13, 1999, pp.57-89.)

Today, many philosophers would still deny that justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge (although most would say that it is still necessary), and there remains no consensus on how the Gettier problem should best be overcome, or how the justified true belief analysis of knowledge can be adequately repaired. Some even say that the Gettier problem is irreparable and that the justified true belief approach to propositional knowledge needs to be abandoned altogether (see Floridi, 2004).

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