

Describe and explain why Gettier-style cases demonstrate that the tripartite account of knowledge is unsustainable. How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases, do you think? Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

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Gettier (1963) triggered off a quasi-obsessive quest for an epistemological holy grail. We are concerned here with an analysis of ‘S knows that P’; a Socratic search for the conditions which are jointly necessary and sufficient for a subject S to know a proposition P. Pre-Gettier, it was generally accepted that S knows that P iff S believes that P, the belief is true, and S’s belief is justified. Gettier came up with two counter-examples showing that justified true belief (‘JTB’) is not sufficient for knowledge. Gettier was not the first to question this tripartite account of knowledge – Plato (Theaetetus), soon after conceiving its prototype, rejected it. However, the pattern of Gettier’s counter-examples, once grasped, created a fascinating puzzle. The questions in the essay title are the elements of the puzzle. This essay will argue, on the basis of an analysis of the pattern and characteristics of Gettier-style cases and some attempts at providing a Gettier-immune analysis of knowledge, that the puzzle is insoluble.

Let us take a typical Gettier-style case. S knows Brad as an honest colleague who says that he cycles everywhere and who comes to work wearing cycling gear. Unbeknownst to S, Chris, another colleague, does cycle to work while Brad is faking it. S tells her friend that one of her colleagues cycles to work. S has good justification for her belief and the belief is true but, since it was formed luckily, we intuitively feel that it does not count as knowledge because we regard knowledge as a non-lucky cognitive achievement (Pritchard 2004, p.204-205).

This example shows that Gettier-style cases have a pattern (Zagzebski 1994, p.69). Take a belief with a strong justification. Make this belief false through bad luck. Then cancel out the bad luck with good luck to change the false belief into a true belief. The bad luck that Brad is a faker is neutralized by the good luck that Chris cycles to work.

Gettier-style cases, as their pattern indicates, presuppose a fallibilist account of knowledge. If S can know that P even if she does not have conclusive evidence for her justification, it follows that S can have adequate justification for a false belief. A large part of what we usually consider to be knowledge consists of beliefs based on defeasible evidence. Adopting overly stringent conditions for justification to guarantee the truth of the belief or to narrow the gap between belief and truth might solve the Gettier problem but will rule out ordinary cases of knowledge (Zagzebski 1994, p.72).

Taking fallibilism as given, responses to the Gettier problem have typically followed one of the following approaches (Goldman A.H., p.182):

Specify a connection between the truth and belief elements. Goldman’s Causal Theory is an example of this type of response. S knows that P iff “the fact P is causally connected in an ‘appropriate’ way with S’s believing P” (1967, p.369). Since the fact that Chris cycles to work is not the cause of S’s belief that a colleague cycles to work, the theory would correctly rule out knowledge.

Rule out misleading evidence either by (a) specifying a fourth condition in addition to JTB or (b) reconceiving or replacing the justification element. An example of a type 2(a) response is the no-false-grounds theory which, in addition to JTB, requires that ‘S’s belief that P is fully grounded’ (Clark 1963, 47). S’s true belief that a colleague cycles to work would, correctly, not count as knowledge because it depends on the false ground that Brad cycles to work. An example of a type 2(b) response is reliabilism which replaces justification by holding that knowledge is true belief produced by a reliable process, whether or not S knows how the belief was produced (Goldman

A.I., 1979). S's true belief that a colleague cycles to work is not the result of a reliable process and, hence, is not knowledge.

A more recent approach is virtue epistemology, a development of reliabilism, which focuses on the reliability of the agent rather than the belief-forming process. "Knowledge is belief arising out of acts of intellectual virtue" (Zagzebski 1998, p.12). However, to handle Gettier-style cases, this theory must depend on the requirement that S believes the truth 'because of' her intellectual virtues. This concept requires further analysis since the crucial distinction between "having a belief, which is true, because of virtue" and "having a true belief because of a virtue" is clearly problematic (Turri 2011, p.3).

These theories, and several others, have fallen prey to other counter-examples. One 'non-standard' Gettier-style case, the famous Fake Barn County case, has proved particularly troublesome. S, while cycling during the day in good visibility conditions, sees a barn but it so happens that, unbeknownst to S, she is cycling in a county which is peppered with fake barns - authentic looking barn facades (adapted from Goldman A.I. 1976, p.772-773). S's true belief that there is a barn is caused by her seeing a real barn, is not based on a false ground, and is the result of a reliable process and, possibly (see previous paragraph), her intellectual virtues. Yet, it was luckily achieved. Most epistemologists, though certainly not all (Lycan, pp.162-163), would consider S not to have knowledge in this case.

Zagzebski asserts that "Gettier problems are inescapable for virtually every analysis of knowledge which at least maintains that knowledge is true belief plus something else" (1994, p.65). Given the reasonableness of a fallibilist account of knowledge, that "something else", whether it is justification or a replacement, with or without any additional condition and whether internalist or externalist, cannot be made to guarantee the truth of the belief. Once there is a gap between the belief and truth elements, one can always generate a Gettier-style case by breaking the link between the elements and then regaining it by accident (Zagzebski 1994, p.69). This insight is compelling because it is based on fallibilism and chance, two unavoidable features for us 'beings-in-the-world'.

The plethora of failed attempts at finding a solution, which characterizes post-Gettier 'S knows that P' literature, lends support to the view that the quest is futile, leading some epistemologists to ask whether there is a Gettier Problem problem (Lycan). Considering that "no effort of analytic philosophy to provide strictly necessary and sufficient conditions for a philosophically interesting concept has ever succeeded" (Lycan, p.149), is the Gettier problem simply a useless puzzle? Although the problem may be insoluble, persisting with an analytic approach is not without philosophical merit. Every failed attempt at solving the Gettier problem gives you a marginally better understanding of the limits of knowledge.

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