

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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The tripartite or classical account of knowledge, whereby knowledge is defined as a justified, true belief was the universally accepted epistemological theory until it was dealt a cataclysmic blow by the publication of a short paper by Edmund Gettier in 1963. In this essay, I examine the attempts made by epistemologists to repair this damage and discuss whether or not it would be preferable to abandon the ruins of the classical theory of knowledge in favour of a new paradigm.

A justified, true belief (JTB) is defined as follows:

- i) p is true
- ii) S believes that p
- iii) S is justified in believing that p

Gettier demonstrated that it was possible to form a justified, true belief that could not be construed as knowledge due to the contribution of two factors 1) the fallibility of the method used to form justification and 2) the involvement of luck in forming the true belief (Hetherington, section 5). A pertinent example is as follows: imagine I see a cardboard cut-out of Madonna across the street. The cut-out is extremely realistic and so I am justified in believing that Madonna is indeed present. As luck would have it, Madonna is actually across the street, just behind the cardboard version and out of sight and my belief is now also true. This combination of luck and the fallibility of my senses when confronted with the cardboard imposter result in a justified, true belief but one that most epistemologists would agree falls short of knowledge.

Responses to these 'Gettier problems' fall broadly into two camps; those who attempt to solve the problem directly – i.e. fix the JTB theory by modifying or adding to the existing conditions and those who attempt to dissolve the problem by re-examining our concept of knowledge.

In the 'solve directly' camp, a sensible first approach would be to see if we can rule out the factors common to all Gettier cases 1) and 2) above. Ruling out 1) leads to the Infallibility Proposal (Hetherington, section 7) which entails that if you know that p, then there must be no possibility that you are mistaken about p. This is problematic as much of what we commonly take to be knowledge is obtained using our fallible senses and would thus be ruled out with this proposal leading to sweeping scepticism.

A proposal to Eliminate Luck can be considered by adding a fourth condition to the definition of JTB of the form

- iv) S's belief that p is not true merely by luck (Ichikawa & Steup, section 8)

Accepting this approach presents difficulties in delineating what are appropriate degrees and types of luck. For example, suppose I won a holiday to Las Vegas whereupon I happened to see the cardboard cut-out of Madonna as described above. This luck in winning a competition led to my forming a justified, true belief that I was across the street from Madonna but it is clear that this is not the sort of luck we want to rule out.

Blanket proposals to eliminate either any fallibility in forming justification or any luck in forming a belief resemble blunt instruments, lacking the finesse to successfully eliminate the Gettier cases and retain the cases

of actual knowledge. But perhaps there are further JTB + x scenarios where the fourth condition, x, is more nuanced whilst still acting as a 'degettiering' clause.

One such suggestion is to eliminate any false evidence whereby x takes the form (Ichikawa & Steup, section 9):

iv) S's belief that p is not inferred from any falsehood

However the 'fake barns' case put forward by Feldman (1974, cited in Hetherington) demonstrated that it was possible to construct a Gettier case where no false evidence was necessarily presented. Furthermore, demanding a complete absence of any falsity in belief before we can grant knowledge leads to scepticism once again.

Perhaps being more specific in the types of false evidence that must be eliminated would help? The No False Core Evidence Proposal (Hetherington, section 9) dictates that only those false beliefs that would weaken the belief in p must be eliminated. Unfortunately the application of this theory is beset with vagueness not least in determining exactly how weak the belief in p would need to be before being discounted as knowledge.

Rather than attempting to eliminate false evidence, we can take a different tack and attempt to ensure that nothing important is left out. This is the defeasibility analysis of knowledge which requires that a justified, true belief is knowledge only if there is no truth that, had the subject been aware of it, would have weakened or defeated the justification for that belief. For example, in the Gettier case presented earlier; if we had seen someone pick up the cardboard cut-out of Madonna, that would have seriously weakened our justification for believing that it was actually Madonna in person across the street.

As with the No False Core Evidence proposal, implementation of this defeasibility condition is open to accusations of vagueness being as it requires us to determine exactly how weak justification can be and still be sufficient for knowledge. In addition, both approaches place high demands on the observer, requiring him to be aware of any false or missing evidence that might undermine his belief and justification (Hetherington, section 10).

Another approach that has been considered is to stipulate a causal relation between the fact p and S's belief that p. Given that, in some sense, the Gettier cases arise due to a break in the connection between truth and justification, replacing the requirement for justification with a causal condition is worthy of investigation. Goldman (1967, cited in Hetherington) suggested the following:

S knows that p iff the fact that p is causally connected in an 'appropriate' way with S's believing p.

An example of appropriate causality would be your eyes working in the standard way to visually perceive an object which then causes you to have a belief (in the standard way) that the object is present in front of you (Hetherington, section 11). However, beyond providing specific examples, it has generally proven difficult to prescribe what constitutes appropriate causality as opposed to what would constitute a 'deviant causal chain'. As a result, this approach, in common with those discussed above, has a tendency towards vagueness.

Given the failure of the direct attempts to solve the Gettier problem, it is time to examine the arguments suggesting that dissolution of the problem is the way forward. It is interesting to consider whether non-epistemologists, or 'ordinary people', would also consider the Gettier cases to be incidences of non-knowledge. And the results are certainly not conclusive (Weinberg, Nichols & Stich 2001, cited in Hetherington). Perhaps it is a mistake to view knowledge as an analytical concept that can be neatly parcelled up in a few choice

clauses. The persistent issue of vagueness common to the direct approaches discussed above would certainly seem to support this and could be indicative that knowledge should instead be viewed as a more intuitive concept (Hetherington, section 12).

One notable feature of the Gettier cases is that they tend to be presented as very specific, isolated incidents. A coherentist viewpoint would seek to situate these incidents within a larger framework whereby justification for knowledge does not just arise from a connection between evidence and true belief in one specific instance but is also supported by a network of inter-related beliefs and linked evidence (Isaacs, 2016).

Referring back to my original example, perhaps the fact that I am in Las Vegas, a place often visited by celebrities, or the fact that I had earlier spotted a large entourage of security guards, and thus concluded someone famous was in town, also contributed to my belief that Madonna was present. Beliefs and justification do not generally occur in a isolated fashion as portrayed by the standard Gettier cases but should be viewed in the light of the extended fabric of beliefs that contribute to one's knowledge base. In my opinion, if a way out of the Gettier rubble is possible, a coherentist approach such as this is the most likely route.

References

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