Lecture 7: The Gettier Problem

I. The Justified-True-Belief Analysis of Knowledge

According to one attractive account, knowledge can be analyzed as follows:

the JTB analysis of knowledge: Subject S knows proposition P if and only if:

i. S believes P,
ii. P is true, and
iii. S is (adequately) justified in believing P.

The JTB analysis of knowledge is often called the “classical” or “traditional” conception of knowledge, and it is commonplace to find philosophers saying things like, “Before Gettier, every epistemologist who ever considered the matter accepted the JTB analysis of knowledge.”

However, I believe that this is something of a myth. First, most pre-20th century epistemologists simply were not concerned with analyzing knowledge, in the modern sense. Second, even those historical figures who might be seen as engaging in some form of analysis often reject the JTB analysis (for example, Plato considers and rejects the view that knowledge is “true judgment with an account” in Theaetetus, and Bertrand Russell offers a Gettier-like example in a book from 1948).

II. Gettier’s Counterexamples

Here are two variants of Gettier’s famous counterexamples to the JTB analysis of knowledge:

example #1: Suppose Darien, whom I know to be generally honest, has told me he lives in Somerville, he’s always wearing Somerville T-shirts, he’s always going on and on about how great Somerville is, and so on. On the basis of this I come to believe (and moreover seem justified in believing):

P₁. Darien, who is a member of my department, lives in Somerville.

One day, I hear of a special promotional offer, whereby any academic who is a member of the same department as someone who lives in Somerville can sign up to receive a free packet of coupons to various Somerville establishments. From P₁, I deduce the following:

Q₁. Someone in my department lives in Somerville.

So I sign up for the promotional offer, thinking myself to be eligible. As it turns out, Darien is a faker and doesn’t really live in Somerville, so P₁ is false. However, Q₁ is true because, unbeknownst to me, Prof. Alison Simmons, who is also in my department, secretly lives in Somerville but hasn’t revealed this to anyone else. So I have a justified true belief in Q₁, although I don’t know Q₁.

example #2: One day I’m driving through the countryside with my eight-year-old son. During one stretch, I see what looks like several sheep standing in a field. As a result, I come to believe (and moreover seem justified in believing):

P₂. Those animals that I see in the field are sheep.

My son, who is too busy looking through a Lego catalogue in the backseat to look out the window, asks me if there are any sheep in the field we’re passing. From P₂, I deduce the following:

Q₂. There are sheep in the field.

So I answer, “Yes, there are sheep in the field.” As it turns out, the animals I saw were large dogs bred and groomed so as to resemble sheep, so P₂ is false. However, Q₂ is true, because there also happens to be several sheep in the field, out of sight behind a grove of trees. So I have a justified true belief in Q₂, although I don’t know Q₂.
III. Defending the Counterexamples

Gettier’s examples rely on the following two principles:

the Justified Falsehood principle (JF): It is possible for a person to be (adequately) justified in believing a false proposition.

the Justified Deduction principle (JD): If S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and believes Q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q.

One way of replying to Gettier is to reject JF. Then I would not be justified in believing P₁ or P₂.

Feldman’s first response. We can make the evidence or reasons that I have for believing P₁ in example #1 as strong as we want. (Add to the story details such as: on numerous occasions I’ve seen Darien enter a Somerville apartment he claimed was his, he’s shown me a seemingly valid lease for a Somerville apartment with his name on it, etc.) It’s very implausible to think that, even then, I would not be justified in believing P₁.

Feldman’s second response. This reply to Gettier implies that hardly anyone is ever justified in believing anything, given the following principle:

the Same Evidence principle (SE): If in two possible scenarios there is no difference in the evidence that a person has concerning some proposition P, then either that person is justified in believing P in both cases, or that person is not justified in believing P in both cases.

(Note: in applying this principle to the cases at hand, Feldman makes certain assumptions about the nature of evidence that some would dispute. What are they?)

Another reply to Gettier is to reject JD. Then I need not be justified in believing Q₁ or Q₂.

Feldman’s response: This reply, when applied to our examples, “seems absurd” (p. 30). How could it be reasonable for me to believe that Darien is a member of my department who lives in Somerville, but unreasonable for me to believe that someone in my department lives in Somerville?

A third way of replying to Gettier is to insist that I do know Q₁ and Q₂. Almost no one takes this response.

IV. The No-False-Grounds Theory

Michael Clark suggests the following way of amending the JTB analysis of knowledge:

the no-false-grounds analysis of knowledge. Subject S knows proposition P if and only if:

i. S believes P,
ii. P is true,
iii. S is justified in believing P, and
iv. all of S’s grounds for believing P are true.

In example #1, Clark’s analysis implies (correctly) that I don’t know Q₁, since my belief in Q₁ depends on my belief in P₁, which is false. However, Clark’s analysis has problems with a variant of example #1:

example #3: Same set-up as before: Darien tells me he lives in Somerville, he’s always wearing Somerville T-shirts, etc. The difference is, on the basis of these facts I come to believe the following instead of P₁:

P₃. There is someone in my department who has told me he lives in Somerville, who is always wearing Somerville T-shirts, etc.

From P₃, I infer:

Q₃. Someone in my department lives in Somerville.

So when I hear about the promotional offer, I sign up, thinking that I’m eligible. As before, Darien is a faker, and it turns out that another member of my department lives in Somerville.