

Lecture 13: Methodological Ruminations on the Gettier Problem

I. The Gettier Problem Problem

After Gettier proposed his famous counterexamples to the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge in 1963, a welter of different theories arose in an attempt to solve “the Gettier problem”: the problem of finding a tidy set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. However, each of these theories fell prey to seemingly decisive counterexamples. This led the defenders of these proposals to add further complications to their theories, but even the revised theories seemed vulnerable to counterexample.

Eventually epistemologists began to despair that a solution to the Gettier problem would ever be found, and among non-epistemologists there seemed to grow a general consensus *that there is something particularly hopeless, irrelevant, or misguided about attempts to solve the Gettier problem*. Following Lycan, let us call the problem of explaining why this is so (if indeed it is) “the Gettier problem problem.”

the Gettier problem problem: What (if anything) is distinctively wrong with the Gettier project?

Two things to think about when answering this question:

1. Is there anything special about the Gettier problem that separates it from other philosophical problems more generally?
2. Is there anything special about the Gettier problem that separates it from other attempts to find necessary and sufficient conditions for some philosophically important notion?

II. Response 1: The Gettier Problem Has Already Been Solved

Some epistemologists have responded to the Gettier problem problem by denying that it really is a problem, since their solution to the Gettier problem works, even if others haven’t yet realized it.

For example, Feldman and Lycan both put forward the proposal that S knows that p iff S has a justified true belief that p whose justification does not essentially depend on a falsehood (or false assumption).

III. Response 2: The Solution to the Gettier Problem Is Just Around the Corner

Even if one doesn’t think that any existing proposal solves the Gettier problem, one might still think that a solution will be found sometime in the future. Considerations that can be adduced in favor of this line:

- *Philosophy is extremely difficult.* After all, we don’t seem close to a solution to the Liar paradox or the problem of free will, yet no one (or, at least, almost no one) thinks those problems are misguided.
- *Why should we assume that a solution to the Gettier problem will be simple or easy to attain?* If problems in the sciences sometime demand complicated solutions that make use of technical notions and rarified vocabulary, why should we suppose that philosophy is any different?

IV. Response 3: Who Cares About the Gettier Problem? It’s Justification That Matters

Some epistemologists have argued that whatever the solution to the Gettier problem is, it doesn’t much matter, since a necessary condition for knowledge is *justification*, and justification is the component of knowledge that matters (both for theoretical purposes and in our daily lives). So we should ignore the analysis of knowledge, and instead focus our energy on delineating the most plausible account of justification.

Two worries about this line:

- It’s not clear that Gettierized justified true belief is as valuable as knowledge.
- More importantly, there is a worry that the same methodological worries about the futility of attempts at analyzing knowledge will reappear for attempts at analyzing justification.

V. Response 4: The Gettier Problem Is Insoluble, Because the Data Is Corrupt

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich had their undergraduates at Rutgers answer the following question:

Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

They found that among their students of Western descent, 26% answered, “Really knows,” and 74% answered, “Only believes.” However, among their students of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi descent, 61% answered, “Really knows,” and 39% answered, “Only believes.”

There are several problems with the design of the experiment, but nonetheless these are striking results. What should we make of them?

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich’s conclusion: Epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture, so we can’t trust them as a guide to the true nature of knowledge as such; at most our intuitions only track our own parochial conception of what counts as knowledge.

Some possible replies (none entirely satisfactory):

- Westerners and people from the Indian subcontinent have different concepts of knowledge.
- Weinberg et al. are looking at the wrong sorts of intuitions; the right sort are accompanied by a clear sense of necessity, or only emerge after an extended period of reflection and/or discussion.
- Intercultural variation in epistemic intuitions doesn’t immediately entail epistemic relativism; after all, we’ve known about intercultural variation in moral intuitions for millennia, but there is still an active debate over whether moral relativism is true.
- In evaluating these results, Weinberg et al. themselves rely on epistemic intuitions about what counts as good evidence for what, what counts as an adequate experimental set-up, etc.

VI. Response 5: The Gettier Problem Is Insoluble, Because Knowledge Is Unanalyzable

Timothy Williamson has influentially argued that *knowledge is unanalyzable*, which would explain our inability to solve the Gettier problem.

an analogy: Just because $\langle x \text{ is a parent of } y \rangle$ entails $\langle x \text{ is an ancestor of } y \rangle$ but not vice versa, it doesn’t follow that we can find non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions of the form:

$x \text{ is a parent of } y \text{ if and only if } (x \text{ is an ancestor of } y \ \& \ \underline{\hspace{2cm}}).$

So just because $\langle S \text{ knows } P \rangle$ entails $\langle P \text{ is true} \rangle$ and $\langle S \text{ believes } P \rangle$ but not vice versa, it doesn’t follow that we can find non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions of the form:

$S \text{ knows } P \text{ if and only if } (P \text{ is true} \ \& \ S \text{ believes } P \ \& \ \underline{\hspace{2cm}}).$

Williamson has two main ways of arguing that knowledge is unanalyzable:

- The first is an *inductive argument* from our history of failure at finding a proper analysis of knowledge.
This is a dangerous argument, since our history of failure at finding a proper solution to *almost every major problem in philosophy* would seem to lead, by a similar chain of reasoning, to general skepticism about the possibility of doing philosophy.
- The second is a more technical argument that *knowledge is a mental state which cannot be “factored” into separate internal and external components*. One part of that argument is presented in “A State of Mind.” (For the rest of his argument, see chs. 2–3 of his book *Knowledge and Its Limits*.)

Here Williamson argues that knowledge is a mental state, so KNOWS P is a mental concept, so KNOWS P cannot be the same concept as HAS A TRUE BELIEF IN P + _____, since the concept TRUE is non-mental.

VII. Response 6: The Gettier Problem Is Insoluble, For Other Reasons

Other sorts of reasons that have (or could be) given for thinking that the Gettier problem is insoluble:

- *Quinean concerns about conceptual and analytic truths:* If the very idea of a conceptual truth is problematic, then seeking conceptual truths about knowledge would seem to be misguided.

(Two possible replies: first, Quine's arguments against analyticity look much less compelling these days than they did several decades earlier; second, we need not assume that philosophical analysis is *conceptual* analysis—instead the thing being analyzed might be knowledge itself, rather than the concept KNOWLEDGE.)

- *Wittgensteinian ideas about family resemblance classes:* Wittgenstein famously argued (or at least asserted) that concepts like CHAIR and GAME cannot be given a non-circular set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Maybe the concept KNOWLEDGE falls into that same category.

(Note: the same two replies as before might apply here as well.)

VIII. Appendix: A Particularly Baroque Attempt at Solving the Gettier Problem

Marshall Swain's indefeasibility analysis of knowledge (quoted by Lycan on p. 149):

Subject S knows proposition P iff:

1. P is true,
2. S is justified in believing P (that is, there is a true body of evidence E such that S is justified in believing E and E justifies P),
3. S believes P on the basis of his justification, and
4. S's justification for P is indefeasible; that is, that there is an evidence-restricted alternative F* to S's epistemic framework F such that:
 - a. <S is justified in believing P> is epistemically derivable from the other members of the evidence component of F*, and
 - b. there is some subset of members of the evidence component of F* such that:
 - i. the members of this subset are also members of the evidence component of F, and
 - ii. <S is justified in believing P> is epistemically derivable from the members of this subset.

F* is an evidence-restricted alternative to an epistemic framework F iff:

- A. for every true proposition Q such that <S is justified in believing ~Q> is a member of the evidence component of F, <S is justified in believing Q> is a member of the evidence component of F*,
- B. for some subset C of members of F such that C is maximally consistent epistemically with the members generating in (A), every member of C is a member of F*, and
- C. no other propositions are members of F* except those that are implied epistemically by the members generated in (A) and (B).