

Lecture 8: 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 the *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 Malcolm, whom I know to be generally honest, has told me he’s immunocompromised, is always talking about how careful he has been during the pandemic due to his weakened immune system, etc. On the basis of this I come to believe (and moreover seem justified in believing):

P₁. Malcolm, who is a member of my department, is immunocompromised.

Then, one day, I get an email from the Harvard administration saying if anyone in your academic department is immunocompromised, that makes you eligible for a second booster shot, if you want one. From P₁, I deduce the following:

Q₁. Someone in my department is immunocompromised.

So I sign up for a second booster shot, thinking myself to be eligible for one. As it turns out, Malcolm is a faker and isn’t really immunocompromised, so P₁ is false. However, Q₁ is true because, unbeknownst to me, Prof. Jeff Behrends, who is also in my department, is immunocompromised but has kept this secret from everyone. 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 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 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 P_1 or P_2 .

Feldman's first counterreply: We can make the evidence or reasons that I have for believing P_1 in example #1 as strong as we want. (Add to the story details such as: Malcolm has shown me medical records certifying that he's immunocompromised, I've accompanied him to doctor appointments at which his weakened immune system was discussed, etc.) It's very implausible to think that, even then, I would not be justified in believing P_1 .

Feldman's second counterreply: 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 Q_1 or Q_2 .

Feldman's counterreply: This reply, when applied to our examples, "seems absurd" (p. 30). How could it be reasonable for me to believe *that Malcolm is a member of my department who is immunocompromised*, but unreasonable for me to believe *that someone in my department is immunocompromised*?

A third way of replying to Gettier is to insist that I *do* know Q_1 and Q_2 . 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 Q_1 , since my belief in Q_1 depends on my belief in P_1 , which is false. However, Clark's analysis has problems with a variant of example #1:

- *example #3:* Same set-up as before: Malcolm has told me he's immunocompromised, is always talking about the extra precautions he has to take during the pandemic, etc. The difference is, on the basis of these facts I come to believe the following instead of P_1 :

P_1^* . Someone in my department has told me he's immunocompromised, is always talking about the extra precautions he has to take during the pandemic, etc.

From P_1^* (which is true), I infer:

Q_1 . Someone in my department is immunocompromised.

So when I receive the email, I sign up for a second booster shot, thinking I'm eligible. As before, Malcolm is a faker, and it turns out that another member of my department is immunocompromised.