Phil. 159: Epistemology
Feb. 22, 2022

Lecture 9: Zagzebski on the Gettier Problem

I. The Gettier Problem (Recap)

Two more Gettier cases:

- *Fake Barn Country (Ginet)*: I'm driving through the countryside with my son. I look to my right and see a (real) barn in broad daylight, under good viewing conditions, etc. As a result, I come to believe *that I just passed a barn*. However, in the vicinity there are a large number of fake, papier-mâché barns, any of which would have fooled me into thinking it was a real barn.
- *Two Viruses (Zagzebski)*: I'm a doctor and have very good inductive evidence that my patient, Smith, is suffering from virus X: he exhibits all of the symptoms of this virus, a blood test has shown that his antibody levels against virus X are extremely high, and his symptoms are not compatible with any other known virus. As a result, I come to believe *that Smith has virus X*. However, Smith's symptoms are due to a distinct and unknown virus Y, and he exhibits high antibody levels to virus X because of various idiosyncratic features of his biochemistry that cause him to maintain unusually high antibody levels long after a past infection. As it turns out, though, Smith has very recently contracted virus X, but so recently that he does not yet exhibit symptoms caused by X, nor has there been time for a change in the antibody levels due to this infection.

In each of these cases, I seem to have a justified true belief that doesn't count as knowledge.

II. The No-Defeaters Theory

In every Gettier case we've considered so far, there is a true proposition such that, if I knew about it, then I would not believe (or would not be justified in believing) the proposition in question: my knowledge of that true proposition would *defeat* the justification that I have for the proposition at issue.

With this in mind, maybe we can revise the JTB analysis as follows:

the no-defeaters analysis of knowledge: Subject S knows proposition P iff:

i. S believes P,
ii. P is true,
iii. S is justified in believing P, and
iv. there is no true proposition Q such that, if S were justified in believing Q, then S would not be justified in believing P.

This analysis seems to correctly handle all of the cases we've considered so far. However, Feldman points out that it has trouble with the following case:

- *The Radio (Feldman)*: "Smith is sitting in his study with his radio off and Smith knows that it is off. At the time, Classic Hits 101 is playing the great [?] Neil Diamond's great [?!?] song, 'Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon.' If Smith had the radio on and turned to that station, Smith would hear the song and know that it is on" (p. 34).

To see why this case is problematic for the no-defeaters analysis, consider the following propositions:

P = the proposition *that the radio is off*

Q = the proposition *that Classic Hits 101 is now playing "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon"*

It seems clear that Smith knows P. However, the following is plausibly true in this scenario:

If Smith were justified in believing Q, then that would be because he turned on the radio and heard the song, so in that case he would not be justified in believing P.

So Smith fails to meet condition (iv) with respect to P, and so fails to count as knowing P on this analysis.

III. Zagzebski on the Insolubility of the Gettier Problem

Zagzebski's central claim: "As long as the property that putatively converts true belief into knowledge is analyzed in such a way that it is strongly linked with the truth, but does not guarantee it, it will always be possible to devise cases in which the link between such a property and the truth is broken but regained by accident" (p. 209).

Suppose we analyze knowledge as "true belief that possesses property *x*" (where property *x* is either a third constraint on knowledge that replaces the justification condition, or a combination of the justification condition and a fourth condition).

Suppose, also, that the truth condition is not redundant in this analysis, so that a belief can have property *x* without being true.

Then Zagzebski provides the following recipe for constructing a Gettier counterexample to our (would-be) analysis of knowledge (pp. 209–10):

Zagzebski's recipe for generating Gettier cases:

1. Start with a case in which a false belief possesses property *x*.
2. Make that belief possess property *x* to a great enough degree to satisfy the third (and possibly fourth) conditions on knowledge.
3. Emend the case so that, due to an element of luck, the belief ends up being true, though it still possesses property *x* to the same degree.

Zagzebski claims that, if we follow this recipe, we will wind up with a case in which we have a true belief possessing property *x* that does not count as knowledge.

Why should we think that it will always be possible to emend our case in the way Zagzebski asks us to without making the belief in question lose property *x*?

Zagzebski's answer: "The falsity of the belief [in the case we started out by considering] will not be due to any systematically describable element in the situation, for if it were, such a feature could be used in the analysis of the components of knowledge other than true belief, and then truth would be entailed by other components of knowledge, contrary to the hypothesis. The falsity of the belief is therefore due to some element of luck" (pp. 209–10).

If we accept Zagzebski's central claim, what, then, are our options? Zagzebski mentions three (pp. 211–12):

- *option #1*: Give up the independence between the *x* condition and the truth condition.

  What Zagzebski says about Plantinga's theory contains the seeds of an objection to this option: if we make the *x* condition so stringent that only true beliefs can satisfy it, there is a danger that we will make our criteria for knowledge much too demanding, resulting in far fewer cases of knowledge than we take there to be.

- *option #2*: Sever any sort of connection between the *x* condition and the truth condition.

  For some reason, Zagzebski thinks that if one pursues this option, "Gettier cases would simply be accepted as cases of knowledge" (p. 211).

- *option #3*: Analyze knowledge as "true belief + *x* + no luck."

  I find this response somewhat baffling. If the *x* condition plus the no-luck condition together entail the truth condition, then this seems to be a version of option #1. But if they don't, then we seem to have found a counterexample to Zagzebski's own recipe for constructing Gettier cases.