

The Gettier Problem: Justified True Belief?

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Abstract

What is the “Gettier Problem”? In the course of this paper we will address the Justified True Belief theory of knowledge; the difficulty raised for this theory via Gettier-style examples; and the prospects (or lack of same) for revising the theory to meet these types of examples.

In the beginning...

In the beginning, knowledge was defined as justified true belief. After Edmund Gettier’s infamous article, “Knowledge is not justified true belief,” which de-bunked this definition, was released, an endless stream of new ideas and counter examples emerged. All of these counter examples have been met with a somewhat luke-warm acceptance.

Before we go into the Gettier problem, we must first look at the previously accepted definition of *knowledge*, which was based on the concept of *justified true belief*.

Traditional Analysis

A traditional account of the concept of knowledge was as follows:

- knowledge = justified, true belief

In other words, *person A knows that X* meant that:

1. X is true;
2. A believes that X;
3. A is justified in believing that X.

So we can see here that there must be three conditions satisfied if person A is to know X. Firstly, person A must believe that X is the case. Secondly, X *must* be true; it must be the case that X is true. Lastly, person A must be justified in believing that X is the case.

For example, let us use the existence of a secretary. Mrs. Knull knows that her secretary is in the office. Let us suppose that she looked into the office and saw a figure that looked like exactly like her secretary. We may suppose that she would completely be justified in believing that her secretary was in the office.

The Monkey Wrench

Edmund Gettier saw a flaw in this argument of justified true belief. In his paper he presented two counterexamples to the traditional theory of knowledge. He demonstrated that the three conditions were satisfied, but person A really did *not* know X!

Gettier presented two examples in that: it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false; and that a deduction from believing something which is flawed also allows the conditions to be satisfied yet, them not really knowing.

Smith and Jones

The first counterexample by Gettier was the existence of Smith having strong evidence for a conjunctive proposition as such:

(a) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Smith's evidence for the above proposition might be that the president assured Smith that Jones would get the job. Smith may have also counted the coins in Jones' pocket. From this Smith infers the following:

(b) the person who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Let's suppose that Smith accepts B based on proposition A. In this case Smith is justified in believing that B is true.

Dumming It Down

To make it simpler and more palatable, let's consider our first example, the office secretary. The issue is that Mrs. Knull knows that her secretary is in the office.

This is based on the following: Mrs. Knull looked into the office and saw a figure that looked exactly like her secretary. We may suppose that she would completely be justified in believing that her secretary was in the office. Let us further suppose that the figure sitting in the office was *not* her secretary, but his twin brother. However, let us continue to say that her secretary was hidden behind the desk waiting to pop out and surprise her.

Gettier brought forth this line of reasoning to conclude that Mrs. Knull indeed did *not* really know that her secretary was in the office. He suggested that the knower was indeed correct, but through coincidence.

Counter-Counter Arguments

There have been several counter-counter arguments to reverse the “Gettier Problem.” However, in each of these additional premises added to the Justified True Belief definition added nothing, or was too restrictive to fix the Gettier problem.

No False Belief Condition

This notion was presented early on to counter act the Gettier problem. It simply stated that the belief X (as in the example above) must not be caused or based on a false belief. This was found to be too broad and yet too restrictive.

Cases could be posed where things that should be known (due to Justified true belief) are not; things that ought not be known (due to justified true belief) are. Consider the above example with Mrs. Knoll’s clone secretary.

Causal Condition

One attempt is that of Alvin Goldman, who puts forth a theory of causal connection between knowledge of propositions. Goldman states that persons A knows that X if and only if the fact X is causally connected in an “appropriate” way with A’s believing that X. What he defines as appropriate is a combination of perception, memory, and a causal chain of events that is correctly constructed through warranted inferences.

In other words, for someone to know something, it must be related to something else that such a person knew in a certain way. This seems quite vague and broad blanketed. Hence the reason why Goldman’s condition does not appear to solve the perceptual Gettier-type problem illustrated above with Mrs. Knoll.

Conclusive Reasons Condition

The *conclusive reasons condition* was offered by Fred Dretske. Dretske argued that person A knows that X if person A has reason R for X, in such a way that if X were not the case, person A would not have reason R.

This was given as defence against the second Gettier case (the person with ten coins in his pocket will get the job). However, it miserably fails our

second scenario, which involves the perceptual issue above with Mrs. Knull and her secretary.

Defeasibility Condition

Lehrer and Paxson put forth a simpler requirement. They state that if there is no other truth (Y) such that person A's believing it would have destroyed his justification for believing that X, then person A does know that X. This may be, in modern times, dubbed the KISS rule; or keep it simple stupid.

This requirement to the three conditions of justified true belief tends to appeal to the common sense side. Mrs. Knull can then be said to *know* that her secretary is in the office, because there is no other truth that would have destroyed her justification for the secretary's presence in the office.

This condition seems to be the one which may best support the counterexamples offered by Gettier. In reality, we cannot go about in doubt of everything that we know. Much like a justified true belief of the sun's revolution about the Earth, we may say that we *know* that the universe is geocentric, until we have another truth (heliocentric) which destroys this view.

Conclusion

The Gettier problem was a monkey wrench thrown into the works of the long standing definition of justified true belief. There have been several attempts to patch the definition of justified true belief. However, most of these patches have been too weak or too strong. The one to make best use of common sense to patch up the Gettier-style problems has been the Defeasibility Condition; although this one too has its pitfalls.