Ed Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

Gettier (pronounced “get-ee-ur”) has been an influential teacher to many at UMass Amherst, but this is his only well-known piece of writing. Yet at a brisk two pages, it has exercised more influence per word than perhaps any other work in western philosophy. With its publication, Gettier touched off a sea change in epistemology that remains with us today.

Just about everyone between Plato and Gettier had taken it for granted that the correct analysis of knowledge is that it’s a justified true belief—justified because you need to have a sufficient amount of evidence to know something, true because it’s impossible to know something false, and a belief because you can’t know something you aren’t aware of, or think is false. What else could there be to knowing something? Gettier doesn’t have an answer to that question, but if he’s right, then that very natural line of reasoning that people have accepted for thousands of years misses something. He’ll try to show that with two thought experiments, which will seem a bit contrived. Nevertheless, if you agree that Smith does not know in even one of the cases, that’s enough to show you that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.

Notes:

- p. 133: You may recall the idea of necessary and sufficient conditions from Frankfurt. Philosophers call something a sufficient condition if it guarantees a particular outcome, but is not required—the outcome could be produced in other ways. Conversely, a necessary condition is one that is required to produce an outcome, but cannot guarantee it by itself. So, for example, getting 100% on all your work in this class is a sufficient condition of getting an A, but it’s not a necessary condition since you could score less than 100% on everything and still get an A. On the other hand, turning in a paper is a necessary condition of getting an A, but it’s not sufficient, since you have to do more than simply turn in a paper to get an A.

- p. 133: Gettier follows the ordinary philosophical convention of using the phrase “S knows that P” to describe what we’re trying to state necessary and sufficient conditions for when we’re in the business of giving an analysis of knowledge. The variable “S” stands for some person or agent, and the variable “P” stands for some proposition or possible state of affairs.

- p. 134: The Ayer that Gettier refers to is A. J. Ayer, another influential mid-20th Century Oxford philosopher. In addition to being a first-rate philosopher, Ayer was a spy for MI6 during WWII, and according to his biographer, he once talked Mike Tyson out of a rage. (If you guys are really excellent in class, I’ll tell you the story.)

- p. 134: The two points Gettier mentions in the first column are very important. His thought experiments don’t work without assuming these.
Take a moment to ask whether or not you think these are safe assumptions to make. If they're not, Gettier's argument probably doesn't work.

- p. 134: To call a proposition “conjunctive” is to say that it has a conjunction in it, namely “and”.

- p. 134: If the president's assurance doesn't see like good enough justification for (d), imagine additional reasons that might give Smith justification, like seeing Jones filling out paperwork in Human Resources. The same goes for Smith's belief that Jones owns a Ford. Add whatever details you think would be needed to make Smith justified in believing it.

- p. 135: The proposition that Jones owns a Ford entails (g), (h), and (i) because of a logical principle called the Rule of Addition. This takes some explanation. In ordinary English, we tend to read sentences of the form “either x or y” as exclusive; we read them as meaning that one or the other is true, but not both. But sometimes either-or sentences can be read inclusively, as in “either Alex gave the state secrets to Beatrice or he gave them to Carol.” This sentence would be true if Alex gave the secrets just to Beatrice, or just to carol, or if he gave them to both. For this reason, we always treat either-or sentences as logically inclusive. So if we have a sentence we take to be true, like “Jones owns a Ford,” we can tack on any other sentence we want to it with “or” and still end up with a true sentence because we know that at least one half of it is true, and that's all we need.

**Questions to think about:**

1. Do you think it would be a problem if there just is no analysis of knowledge?

2. Is there anything you think we should add to the "justified true belief" analysis of knowledge that could get around Gettier's cases?

3. Do you accept Gettier's two assumptions about justification?

**Extras**

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