Second prize: Trinity 2024 **David Molineux**

Describe and explain why Gettier-style cases demonstrate that the tripartite account of knowledge is unsustainable. How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases, do you think? Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

Introduction

In this essay I shall argue that Gettier-style cases present a threat to the tripartite account of knowledge. I discuss several suggestions for developing a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases but argue that all of them fail. My final conclusion is there is *no* theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases – but other methods of understanding knowledge may offer a way to avoid Gettier-style cases.

a) Gettier cases undermine the tripartite account of knowledge

For many years, the accepted idea was that propositional knowledge was justified true belief. In order for a person to know something, they must *believe* it, the belief must be *true*, and the person's belief must be *well supported*. Without this latter condition the belief could just be a lucky guess. So these three conditions are individually necessary, and jointly sufficient for knowledge –the so-called tripartite account of knowledge or justified-true-belief (JTB) account of knowledge.

All this changed in 1963 with the publication of Edmund Gettier's famous 1963 paper, '*Is Justified True Belief Knowledge*?'

Gettier argued that a combination of true beliefs and justification were not sufficient for knowledge. He made this argument by presenting two cases where the characters in the cases had justified true beliefs but seemed to not have knowledge. Gettier's cases[1] were rather complex, so here is a case which illustrates the problem in the same way as Gettier's cases but is simpler.

The sheep in the field (Chisholm 1989, quoted in Pritchard (2023) p26).

A farmer - let's call her Gayle – forms her belief that there is a sheep in the field by looking at a shaggy dog which happens to look just like a sheep. As it turns out, however, there is a sheep in the field (standing behind the dog) and hence Gayle's' belief is true. Moreover, her belief is also justified, because she has great evidence for thinking that there is a sheep in the field.

Gayle's belief that there is a sheep in the field is a true belief (there is indeed a sheep in the field), and this belief is justified (Gayle reached her belief by using stable visual faculties, in good lighting etc). But we would not want to say this

[1] For example, a *conjunction* case involving a man who gets a job and has ten coins in his pocket, and a *disjunction* case involving a man (Jones) with a Ford car and a different man (Brown) who is in either Barcelona, Boston or Brest-Litovsk

was knowledge – the belief was true because of luck (due to the hidden sheep behind the dog). It seems therefore that the claim that knowledge is justified true belief is false.

All Gettier cases have the same basic structure (Zagzebski 1994).

(I illustrate the basic structure with examples from the Gayle case)

a) There is a true belief (‘*there is a sheep in that field’*) that is true by luck – without the intervention of luck, it would be a false belief.
b) The belief is justified, but the justification (‘*I can see a sheep with my normally good vision’*) is fallible.
c) There is both bad luck and good luck, and the bad luck is cancelled out by the good luck, so that the end product is truth. The bad luck comes because a sound epistemic method is used (see (b) above) but this fails to produce the truth (*Gayle erroneously thinks that a dog is a sheep*). The good luck is that the observer reaches a true conclusion – but by chance rather than a sound epistemic process. (*Gayle correctly believes that there is a sheep in the field*).
d) How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

I want to argue that *no* theory of knowledge is immune to the Gettier challenge. Very many attempts have been made to modify the basic JTB account of knowledge, but none have been successful. There is a vast literature on this topic, so this section is necessarily brief.

One approach would be insist on *no false beliefs*. In the first Gettier scenario, the case was set up with a false belief – Smith believes that Jones will get the job. So it might be thought that the Gettier problem could be solved by defining knowledge as JTB with no false beliefs. But this is problematic – some Gettier cases (for example, the sheep/dog case) do not contain any false beliefs, and insisting on no false beliefs at all would be demand a too high standard for knowledge (Jennifer Nagel (2016) gives a nice example – if a detective reaches a conclusion based on the testimony of 12 witnesses, one of whom is lying, we will still want to say that the detective knows who did the crime, despite one false belief). Another suggestion is *infallibility*. But this is unrealistic – if we insisted on this criterion, we would never know anything. Another approach is to try and *eliminate luck* so that for a belief to be knowledge, it has to be arrived at by a luck-free process. But this again sets a too-high standard for knowledge – and seems to reduce to infallibility, which is problematic for reasons given above. Many more analyses of justification that purported to avoid the Gettier problem have been offered by epistemologists. All of them (eventually) failed.

The above methods have been *internalist* approaches – theories of knowledge where the justificatory conditions have been accessible to the subject (Lemos 2007, p108). Do *externalist* theories (where the reasons for a belief are *not*

accessible to the subject) do any better? One externalist theory of knowledge is *reliabilism* (Pritchard 2023, p55) – true beliefs are knowledge if they have been produced by a reliable process, such as normal perception. However, this approach seems to repeat many of the problems of internalist theories of knowledge. For example, Gayle's belief that there is a sheep in the field is formed from a very reliable process but is still only true by luck.

A more promising approach is to move to theories of knowledge that are based on epistemic virtue – the so-called *virtue epistemology (VE)* approach (see for example Battaly (2005)). The idea here is that knowledge is a true belief '*because of'* an epistemic virtue (Sosa (2007), Turri (2011), Zagzebski (1999)). The VE approach seems to solve the Gettier problem – by stipulating that knowledge is belief where the truth is '*because o*f' a cognitive competence, it seems that luck is eliminated from the process of knowledge acquisition. To take my earlier example, Gayle does *not* have knowledge that there is a sheep in the field, because she did not reach the belief that there was a sheep in the field *because of* her intellectual virtue, but because of luck.

This seems promising, but in the next section, I suggest that even this method is problematic.

b) Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases?

The VE approach seems to work against Gettier cases because it 'closes the gap' between justified belief and truth – by eliminating luck. But this solution to the Gettier problem comes at a cost, and I shall argue that this cost is too high. In order to avoid the Gettier counterexamples, the contribution of luck to the belief has to be *completely* eliminated – or else the case can be Gettierised (Church 2021 p 3). In order to avoid the threat of Gettierisation, the bar for knowledge has to be set very high – so high that it is *completely* derived from virtuous epistemic processes. And (as for the infallibilist proposal for justification), this would make it very hard to have any knowledge *at all*.

The radical conclusion from Gettier is therefore that *no* definitional theory of knowledge is immune to the Gettier challenge. Before we accept this disheartening conclusion however it is possible to propose two completely different ways of thinking about knowledge that avoid the Gettier challenge. This is perhaps the most valuable outcome from Gettier's paper – whist it has not been possible to 'solve' the Gettier problem, the paper has challenged epistemologists to think in a new way about knowledge.

The first approach derives from Wittgenstein (1953) and claims that knowledge is a 'family resemblance' concept. All knowledge is not of the same kind.

Rather, there are things that all sorts of knowledge have in common (and things that different kinds of knowledge *do not* have in common)

The second approach is to deny that knowledge can be analysed into simpler constituent concepts (such as true belief and justification). Instead, knowledge is basic and unanalysable. This approach is called the 'Knowledge-first' approach (Williamson, 2000) and rather than building up a definition of knowledge from more basic concepts (like belief) knowledge is the basic concept and other concepts are derived from knowledge.

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