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Study about Justified True Belief and The Gettier Problem

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Abstract : To better understand the JTB definition of knowledge, let's go through each of the three elements. First is that the statement must be true. I can't claim to know that Elvis Presley is alive, for example, if he is in fact dead. Knowledge goes beyond my personal feelings on the matter and involves the truth of things as they actually are. Some critics of the JTB definition of knowledge question whether truth is always necessary in our claim to know something. For example, based on the available evidence of the time, scientists in the middle ages claimed to know that the earth was flat. Even though we understand now that it isn't, at the time they had knowledge of something that was false. Didn't they? In response, it may have been reasonable for scientists back then to believe the world was flat, but they really didn't know that it was. Their knowledge claims were premature in spite of how strong their convictions were. This is a trap that we fall into all the time. While talking with someone I may say insistently, "I know that Joe's car is blue!" When it turns out that Joe's car is in fact red, I have to apologize for overstating my conviction. Truth, then, is an indispensable component of knowledge.

Second, I must believe the statement in order to know it. For example, it's true that Elvis Presley is dead, and there is enormous evidence to back this up. But if I still believe that he is alive, I couldn't sincerely say that I know that he is dead. Part of the concept of knowledge involves our personal belief convictions about some fact, irrespective of what the truth of the matter is. Critics of the JTB definition of knowledge sometimes think that belief isn't always required for our claims to know something. For example, I might say "I know I'm growing old, but I don't believe it!" In this case, I have knowledge of a particular fact without believing that fact. In response, if I say the previous sentence, what I actually mean is that I'm not capable of imagining myself getting old or I haven't yet emotionally accepted that fact. I just make my point more dramatically by saying "I don't believe it!" Instead I really do believe it, but I don't like it.

Third, I must be justified in believing the statement insofar as there must be good evidence in support of it. Suppose that I randomly pick a card out of a deck without seeing it. I believe it is the Queen of Hearts, and it actually is that card. In this case I couldn't claim to know that I've picked the Queen of

Hearts; I've only made a lucky guess. Critics question whether evidence is really needed for knowledge. For example, a store owner might say "I know that my employees are stealing from me, but I can't prove it!" Here the store owner has knowledge of a particular fact without any evidence for it. In response, the store owner is really saying that he strongly believes that his employees are stealing from him, but doesn't have enough evidence to press charges. Evidence, then, is indeed an integral part of knowledge.

The Gettier Problem

For some time, the justified true belief (JTB) account was widely agreed to capture the nature of knowledge. However, in 1963, Edmund Gettier published a short but widely influential article which has shaped much subsequent work in epistemology. Gettier provided two examples in which someone had a true and justified belief, but in which we seem to want to deny that the individual has knowledge, because luck still seems to play a role in his belief having turned out to be true.

Consider an example. Suppose that the clock on campus (which keeps accurate time and is well maintained) stopped working at 11:56pm last night, and has yet to be repaired. On my way to my noon class, exactly twelve hours later, I glance at the clock and form the belief that the time is 11:56. My belief is true, of course, since the time is indeed 11:56. And my belief is justified, as I have no reason to doubt that the clock is working, and I cannot be blamed for basing beliefs about the time on what the clock says. Nonetheless, it seems evident that I do not know that the time is 11:56. After all, if I had walked past the clock a bit earlier or a bit later, I would have ended up with a false belief rather than a true one.

i. The No-False-Belief Condition

We might think that there is a simple and straightforward solution to the Gettier problem. Note that my reasoning was tacitly based on my belief that the clock is working properly, and that this belief is false. This seems to explain what has gone wrong in this example. Accordingly, we might revise our analysis of knowledge by insisting that to constitute knowledge, a belief must be true and justified and must be formed without relying on any false beliefs. In other words, we might say, justification, truth, and belief are all necessary for knowledge, but they are not jointly sufficient for knowledge; there is a fourth condition – namely, that no false beliefs be essentially involved in the reasoning that led to the belief – which is also necessary.

Unfortunately, this will not suffice; we can modify the example so that my belief is justified and true, and is not based on any false beliefs, but still falls short of knowledge. Suppose, for instance, that I do not have any beliefs about the clock's current state, but merely the more general belief that the clock usually

is in working order. This belief, which is true, would suffice to justify my belief that the time is now 11:56; of course, it still seems evident that I do not know the time.

ii. The No-Defeaters Condition

However, the no-false-belief condition does not seem to be completely misguided; perhaps we can add some other condition to justification and truth to yield a correct characterization of knowledge. Note that, even if I didn't actively form the belief that the clock is currently working properly, it seems to be implicit in my reasoning, and the fact that it is false is surely relevant to the problem. After all, if I were asked, at the time that I looked at the clock, whether it is working properly, I would have said that it is. Conversely, if I believed that the clock wasn't working properly, I wouldn't be justified in forming a belief about the time based on what the clock says.

In other words, the proposition that the clock is working properly right now meets the following conditions: it is a false proposition, I do not realize that it is a false proposition, and if I had realized that it is a false proposition, my justification for my belief that it is 11:56 would have been undercut or defeated. If we call propositions such as this "defeaters," then we can say that to constitute knowledge, a belief must be true and justified, and there must not be any defeaters to the justification of that belief. Many epistemologists believe this analysis to be correct.

iii. Causal Accounts of Knowledge

Rather than modifying the JTB account of knowledge by adding a fourth condition, some epistemologists see the Gettier problem as reason to seek a substantially different alternative. We have noted that knowledge should not involve luck, and that Gettier-type examples are those in which luck plays some role in the formation of a justified true belief. In typical instances of knowledge, the factors responsible for the justification of a belief are also responsible for its truth. For example, when the clock is working properly, my belief is both true and justified because it's based on the clock, which accurately displays the time. But one feature that all Gettier-type examples have in common is the lack of a clear connection between the truth and the justification of the belief in question. For example, my belief that the time is 11:56 is justified because it's based on the clock, but it's true because I happened to walk by at just the right moment. So, we might insist that to constitute knowledge, a belief must be both true and justified, and its truth and justification must be connected somehow.

This notion of a connection between the truth and the justification of a belief turns out to be difficult to formulate precisely, but causal accounts of knowledge seek to capture the spirit of this proposal by more

significantly altering the analysis of knowledge. Such accounts maintain that in order for someone to know a proposition, there must be a causal connection between his belief in that proposition and the fact that the proposition encapsulates. This retains the truth condition, since a proposition must be true in order for it to encapsulate a fact. However, it appears to be incompatible with fallibilism, since it does not allow for the possibility that a belief be justified yet false. (Strictly speaking, causal accounts of knowledge make no reference to justification, although we might attempt to reformulate fallibilism in somewhat modified terms in order to state this observation.

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