

Is The Standard Definition of Knowledge Incomplete?

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The aim of this paper is to suggest a new interpretation to the Gettier problem by showing that the standard JTB definition of knowledge is not epistemologically incomplete, being at the same time formally incomplete. The Gettier problem is shown to emerge through the implicit self-application of the JTB definition of knowledge to prove its own incompleteness. A conclusion is drawn, which runs counter to the traditional view that the problem necessarily requires a conceptual amendment of the standard definition, in spite of the formal incompleteness of the latter. The Gettier problem is construed to be related to the ancient Meno problem within a contemporary justificational discourse.

Keywords: JTB definition of knowledge, Gettier problem, Meno problem, justification, self-application.

1. Preliminary Remarks

The standard definition of knowledge was inspired by Plato's dialogues *Theaetetus*, *The Republic*, and mostly by *Meno*. To Meno's question "Why knowledge should be so much more prized than right opinion, and indeed how there is any difference between them" (*Meno* 97 d), Socrates explains his answer using a dialectical metaphor. It is based on the legendary masterhood of Daedalus to create statues in so perfect a manner that, if not tethered, they run away and escape:

Socrates: ...And that, I may say, has a bearing on the matter of true opinions. True opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place, but they will not stay long. They run away from a man's mind; so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason. (*Meno* 97e–98a)

The last metaphor of "tethering", or "working out the reason" of a true opinion (alēthēs dóxa), and thus turning it into knowledge (epistēmē),

was further elucidated by Socrates through his well known theory of recollection. Philosophers, who do not accept the literal message of Plato's epistemological view, have elaborated his approach, to reach the tacit agreement that knowledge is *justified true belief (JTB)*. And this standard JTB definition has seemed to be unproblematically indorsed (at least by analytic philosophers) until the beginning of the 60ies of the twentieth century.

Then in 1963 on the epistemological scene appeared Edmund Gettier. In a short, three pages article, he managed to destroy the plausibility of the accepted standard definition (Gettier 1963). He succeeded in so doing, by adducing two clear cases, showing that one could have some *true belief* that is also *justified*, and yet not have *knowledge*. So the claim has been raised that JTB is probably necessary, but not a sufficient condition for having knowledge, and that a better definition of knowledge must be discovered. Thus the notorious *Gettier problem* was born, and since then has not obtained a commonly accepted solution; or, as Robert Shope puts it:

In spite of the vast literature that Gettier's brief paper elicited, there is still no widespread agreement as to whether the Gettier problem has been solved, nor as to what constitutes the most promising line of research. (Shope 1998: 54)

A decade, or so, after this remark by R. Shope, "the literature on Gettier's brief paper" has rapidly enhanced. The standard strategy of searching for a definition of knowledge *stronger* than JTB, so that it could stay outside the pincers of the Gettier problem, has not resulted, however, in forging such a definition of knowledge to be generally accepted, or at least as tacitly accepted as JTB has been till 1963.

The aim of this paper is to suggest a new interpretation to the Gettier problem, by showing that its genesis lies in the implicit application of the JTB definition to gain its own incompleteness.

The Gettier problem, however, still persists in the renovated conceptual garments of the Meno problem about "tethering" mere true beliefs to be turned into knowledge. These garments bear the label of *justification*. So, it is the idea of justification that needs to be placed in the centre of a broader and deeper analysed.

2. *A New Look at the Gettier Problem*

After the publication of Gettier's paper, a good deal of Gettier-like counter-examples to the standard (JTB) definition of knowledge was suggested. Since they all have a common anti-luck-and-luck scenario, I'll prefer to turn back to the first original case, presented by Gettier himself.

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

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

Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails: e. The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true.

But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not *know* that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job (Gettier 1963: 121–2).

The key claim from the cited case above certainly is

(K) "Smith does not *know* that (e) is true".

Now let us pose the question: "Who is the *knower* of (K)?" The direct answer is that the knower is the teller of the story; let us accept that this is E. Gettier himself. But how he came to *know* that (K)?

This is a crucial question, because, if this claim were not true, then Gettier would not fulfil his task to show that JTB account of knowledge fails.

Of course, as a counterexample to a claimed theory of knowledge, it doesn't actually seem to matter whether anyone knows that the counterexample exists, or not. So, one could contend that Gettier is not supposed to prove that he knows that K. It is Smith who doesn't know that he himself will get the job, and that he has ten coins in his pocket, but nevertheless believes that (e) is true. Thus it seems that the knowledge of (K) is not related to the demonstration of the incompleteness of the JTB definition of knowledge.

However, it is the very definition of knowledge that is at stake here. To this effect Gettier (the teller of the story) must be certain of what he would like to convince us. It is no doubt that *an instrument for analysing knowledge (all the more its definition) has to be of a cognitive nature*; that is to say, it must not be *less* than knowledge, for instance a mere opinion, or a fabricated story, staying outside of some real cognitive context. Hence Gettier simply *has to know that (K)*. But in order for him to be a knowing agent – in this case a *meta-knowing agent* – he himself must be involved in a *real cognitive situation*, and not to be an inventive contriver of the adduced story.

So, how Gettier may really have knowledge that (K)?

The answer to this question would mean elucidating the fact that *he has a meta-knowledge in comparison to Smith*, who does not know that (e) is true. To this effect Gettier must be involved in a genuine situation

of *knowledge acquisition*.

Suppose that Gettier may “have strong evidence” that Jones has ten coins in his pocket, since he was a secret eye-witness when Smith was counting them “ten minutes ago”. He then is certain that Smith knows that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Let us further suppose that he managed to count the coins in Smith’s pocket as well (when Smith was buying a cup of coffee at the near counter, for instance), and found that Smith had also ten coins in his pocket, and that he had also heard the words of the president of the company, when the latter was assuring Smith “that Jones would in the end be selected” for the job to which both men had applied. Then as the story goes, he correctly reaches the conclusion that (K).

But what does it mean that Gettier *has knowledge* that (K) in *his* situation of a meta-knowing agent? Let us pay attention to the fact that “all of the following are true”, to use Gettier’s own mode of argumentation: (iv) (K) is true, (v) Gettier believes that (K) is true, and (vi) Gettier is justified in believing that (K) is true.

Thus, as a meta-knowing agent, Gettier comes to know that (K) *in the way required by the JTB definition*. But it is namely the claim (K) that bears the burden of proving the insufficiency of *this same* definition of knowledge. So, what comes out is that the definition is being *implicitly* self-applied. We are facing a situation when a definition is appropriately used – an act presupposing its adequacy – to show its own inadequacy (its own incompleteness).

My new interpretation to the Gettier problem presented so far, does not show that the JTB definition of knowledge is a complete definition. It is, regrettably, formally incomplete. What I have, however shown, is that from an epistemological point of view this standard definition is not in need of an amendment, provided the conceptual requirements of its three partite structure are properly fulfilled.

3. *Conclusions*

The Gettier cases – as well as the first original case suggested by Gettier himself, and analyzed here – presuppose a concealed teller of a story suggesting a contrived situation, based on the JTB definition of knowledge, in which a knowing agent could be deceived that she knows something, while she does not. However, the very definition of knowledge that is here under attack lays the requirement that each fabricated story be considered within a real cognitive context. To this effect Gettier (the teller of the story) must be placed in a position of a meta-knowing agent. This is so, because an instrument for analysing knowledge (all the more its definition), a story no matter how fabricated, has to be of a cognitive nature. It was shown that at a meta-knowing level the JTB definition was kept intact. Thus *a specific negative answer to the title question was reached*: the standard (JTB) definition of knowledge is not *epistemologically* incomplete, being at the same time *formally* incom-

plete. The standard definition of knowledge does really work, provided the justification at hand is sound and trustworthy. If not, *it is not the JTB definition to be blamed*, but the cognitive potential of the knowing agent, and the contingent limitations of her interpretative context, so that a bad luck could not be evaded.

Having probably an intuition for a similar conclusion, Alvin Plantinga once wrote:

After 1963 the justified true belief account of knowledge was seen to be defective and lost its exalted status; but even those convinced by Gettier that justification (along with truth) isn't *sufficient* for knowledge still mostly think it *necessary* and *nearly* sufficient for knowledge: the basic shape or contours of the concept of knowledge is given by justified true belief, even if a quasi-technical fillip or addendum ("the fourth condition") is needed to appease Gettier. (Plantinga 1990: 45, his italics)

The here reached conclusion removes the necessity of "quasi-technical fillips" allegedly amending the JTB definition, enlarging it with "addenda". This "definitional" line of research, being otherwise stubbornly followed, may well be deserted. The Gettier problem is inspired by the ancient Meno problem within a contemporary justificational discourse. Instead of Plato's ancient metaphorical instruction of "tethering", or "working out the reason" of a merely true belief, the believer should care about its *adequate justification*.

By "adequate justification" I have in mind not the invention of some new *theory of justification* (that is certainly a theoretical ideal, but no less certainly a doubtful and problematic aim). I have in mind the specification of *paradigmatic justificational contexts* (e.g. mundane, juridical, scientific, etc.). For every cognitive situation in each of the paradigmatic contexts the explication of a relevant set of necessary criteria for justification is principally possible, so that the validity of stated propositions of interest to be warranted, and not merely guessed.

References

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