

Gettier's Case I and the Inseparability Argument¹

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I offer a definition of epistemic justification and a pseudocode algorithm for determining the justification status of an epistemic agent's belief. By applying the proposed definition and the pseudocode algorithm to Gettier's Case I, another possibility emerges: the epistemic agent is not justified in believing that p . At the heart of the argumentative strategy that this paper employs is the idea that S 's belief that p and S 's evidential basis, e , for believing that p are inseparable from each other. As a consequence, S 's belief that p cannot correctly be assessed on its own but only in conjunction with S 's evidential basis e for believing that p .

KEY WORDS: Actual belief, epistemic justification, evidence, Gettier Problem, inseparability argument, pseudocode algorithm.

1. Introduction

Many philosophers are of the view that Edmund Gettier (1963) has successfully refuted the tripartite² analysis of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB Thesis) through his famous counterexamples to it (see, e.g., Huemer 2002; Koethe 2005; Sosa et al. 2008; Atkins 2017; Whitesmith 2020). According to the JTB Thesis, a *subject* (or an *epistemic agent*) S knows that p if and only if the following *conditions* obtain: (C_1): p is

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² In this paper, the term 'tripartite' is preferred over the term 'traditional' in describing the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Following Julien Dutant (2016), we can maintain that while it may be correct to say that Gettier has refuted the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, there are good reasons to believe that what Gettier has refuted is not the traditional one.

true, (C_2) : S believes that p , and (C_3) : S is justified in believing that p . As usual, $(C_1) - (C_3)$ should be construed as conditions that are *individually necessary* and *jointly sufficient* for propositional knowledge.³ Thus, in cases where $(C_1) - (C_3)$ obtain, we should be willing to say that S knows that p . Gettier, however, has shown, and very convincingly, if I may add, that it is possible for us to construct scenarios such that $(C_1) - (C_3)$ obtain but S fails to know that p . This leads him to the conclusion that knowledge is not simply justified true belief. In other words, Gettier, through his counterexamples, has shown that the JTB Thesis is false.

In this paper, I will explore the tenability of the following position: in Gettier's Case I (and in other cases that are structurally similar to it), S does not have a justified true belief that p . Thus, the question as to whether or not S knows that p does not arise. To demonstrate the tenability of this position, the paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will discuss Gettier's Case I in order to lay the groundwork for the argument that I will develop in this paper. In Section 3, I will demonstrate that in Gettier's Case I, S 's *actual belief* has the following complex structure: S believes that p because e . In this schema, ' e ' refers to S 's *evidential basis* for believing that p and should therefore be construed as *epistemic reasons* or *grounds* rather than *doxastic* ones.⁴ In the same section, I will also demonstrate that S 's belief that p and S 's evidential basis, e , for believing that p are *inseparable*. This means that an assessment of S 's belief that p cannot correctly be made without considering the epistemic relevance of e to the said belief. In Section 4, I will demonstrate that in Gettier's Case I and in other cases that are structurally similar to it, S does not have a justified true belief that p . To do this, I will first provide a definition of *epistemic justification* that handles the aforementioned scenario quite well. The definition will then be followed by a *pseudocode algorithm* in order to determine the *justification status* of S 's belief that p . Finally, in Section 5, the conclusion, I will summarize the main results of the paper.

³ Like Alvin Goldman (1967), I will only be concerned with *empirical* propositions in this paper. Thus, the most recent works that deal with the Gettier Problem and the *a priori* (see, e.g., Berghofer (2023)) are beyond the scope of the argument that I am developing in this paper.

⁴ Epistemic reasons or grounds serve to support the truth of an epistemic agent's belief by providing a *foundation* or *basis* upon which the belief can be considered justified. Let us assume that S believes that it will rain today (p). An epistemic reason for S 's belief that p might be the fact that the weather forecast predicts a high probability of rain due to current atmospheric conditions (e). It is in this sense that the schema S believes that p because e should be understood. Epistemic reasons are typically contrasted with doxastic reasons, which pertain to the psychological processes or experiences that lead an epistemic agent to hold a belief.

2. Gettier's Case I Revisited

Since many philosophers are convinced that Gettier successfully refuted the JTB Thesis, it is safe to say that these philosophers agree with *Gettier's Intuition* (GI). To maximize clarity, we can say that (GI) is the view that Gettier's Case I and II present us with scenarios where *S* has a justified true belief that *p* but fails to know that *p*. In this section, I will provide a brief summary of Gettier's Case I in order to bring to the fore its overall *structure*. Recall that in Gettier's Case I, we have the following scenario:

Smith and Jones both applied for a job. Prior to the job interview, Smith counted the number of coins in Jones' pocket and found that Jones had ten coins. At the conclusion of the job interview, the president of the company informed Smith that Jones would be selected for the position. Unbeknownst to Smith, however, he will actually be the one chosen for the job, and he also has ten coins in his pocket.

To better facilitate our discussion of Gettier's Case I, let us consider the following:

- (i) Jones will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.
- (ii) Smith will get the job.
- (iii) Smith has ten coins in his pocket.
- (iv) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Gettier assumes that having *strong evidence* for (i) above *means* that Smith is justified in believing that (i). In the meantime, let us assume that Gettier is correct on this one.⁵ Given this assumption, we can say that since Smith has strong evidence for (i), then Smith is justified in believing that (i). Gettier even provides us with Smith's evidence for (i):

- (a) Jones will get the job (according to the president of the company).
- (b) Jones has ten coins in his pocket (since Smith counted the number of coins in Jones' pocket).

Going back to the (i) – (iv) above, we can make some initial observations regarding Gettier's Case I. First, Smith does not believe (ii) and this is due to (a). Second, Smith also does not believe (iii). This is so because, as

⁵ Actually, it would be more appropriate for Gettier to say that if Smith has strong evidence for (i), then it is reasonable for Smith to believe that (i). It is clear, however, that while it may be reasonable for Smith to believe that (i) because Smith has strong evidence for (i), it does not follow that (i) is true, or that Smith is justified in believing that (i).

Gettier himself tells us, Smith has no idea about the number of coins in his own pocket. In other words, (iii) above is unknown to Smith. At this point, let us trace the steps that Gettier took (or the reasoning process that he employed) in order to refute the JTB Thesis:

- (1) Smith has strong evidence for (i) (due to (a) and (b)).
- (2) Since Smith has strong evidence for (i), Smith is justified in believing that (i).
- (3) (i) logically entails (iv).
- (4) Smith infers (iv) from (i).
- (5) Since Smith is justified in believing that (i), and from the steps above, Smith is also justified in believing that (iv).
- (6) As it turns out, (i) is false, but (ii) and (iii) are both true.
- (7) Since (ii) and (iii) are both true, (iv) still turns out to be true (luckily? for Smith).
- (8) At this point, we can easily see that all the conditions included in the *analysans* of the JTB Thesis have been satisfied, to wit: (iv) is true, Smith believes that (iv), and Smith is justified in believing that (iv).
- (9) If the JTB Thesis is correct, then in this case, we should be willing to say that Smith knows that (iv).
- (10) However, we are not willing to say that in this case, Smith knows that (iv).
- (11) Therefore, knowledge is not (simply) justified true belief.
- (12) Therefore, the JTB Thesis is incorrect.

After tracing the steps that Gettier took in order to refute the JTB Thesis, we are now in a position to comment on Case I's overall structure. In this preliminary part of the paper, I will limit what I have to say to four important points that should be clear from the get-go. First, Gettier assumes that Smith's having strong evidence for (i) is *sufficient* for us to be able to say that Smith is justified in believing that (i).⁶ Second, Gettier's Case I, as well as his Case II, are cases that involve *inference*. In the steps above, for example, we can easily see that Smith infers (iv) from (i). Third, Gettier treats (iv) in *isolation* from (i). Fourth, Gettier assesses the justification status of Smith's belief that (iv) in isolation from

⁶ This assumption can easily be shown to be incorrect. As we all know, the presence of *epistemic defeaters* can easily explain why it is not always the case that if *S* has strong evidence for *p*, then *S* is also justified in believing that *p*. As Andrea Robitzsch (2019: 197) tells us, an epistemic defearer "undermines the positive epistemic status of a certain doxastic attitude."

(i).⁷ As we shall see in the next section, these points will play a crucial role in the argument that I will develop in this paper.

3. The Inseparability Argument

In this section, I will provide a *full specification* of *S*'s belief in order to demonstrate that *S*'s *actual belief* is more complex than what Gettier wants us to believe. If this is correct, given the more complex structure of *S*'s actual belief, the assessment of its justification status requires that we look not only into *S*'s belief that *p*, but also into *S*'s evidential basis, *e*, for believing that *p*. At the heart of this argumentative strategy is the idea that *S*'s belief that *p* and *S*'s evidential basis, *e*, for believing that *p* are *inseparable* from each other. This inseparability means that we cannot fully assess the justification of *S*'s belief without considering the evidence that underpins it. In other words, the strength and validity of the belief are intrinsically linked to the quality and relevance of the evidence available to *S*.

An argument that can be raised against Gettier's Case I and Case II has something to do with his *treatment* of beliefs as if these beliefs can correctly be *isolated* from the evidence that epistemic agents have for their beliefs. In Case I, for example, this is clearly seen in his treatment of (i) Jones will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket, and (iv) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Recall that when Gettier demonstrates that Smith has a justified true belief, the belief in question is none other than (iv). Essentially, he showed that (iv) is true, Smith believes that (iv), and Smith is justified in believing that (iv). I think that this is an *oversimplification* of the structure of Smith's actual belief. Let me explain the underlying reasons for this.

First of all, Smith *inferred* (iv) from (i). It is, therefore, an *inferential belief*. Such being the case, it would be more *natural* to think that in Case I, Smith *only* accepts (or believes) that (iv) *because* of (i). Thus, if we take away (i) from the equation, the question as to whether or not Smith accepts that (iv) would not even arise (or make sense). Again,

⁷ When I say that Gettier treats (iv) in isolation from (i), what I mean is that Gettier does not truly consider (iv) as a mere extension or consequence of (i) but as a proposition that, although derived from (i), is independent from it. This explains why (iv) can be true even if (i) is false. According to the argument that I will present shortly, *S*'s actual belief has a more complex structure: *S* believes that *p* because *e* where '*e*' is to be construed as epistemic reasons or grounds rather than doxastic ones. Viewed in this light, *S*'s belief that *p* cannot be correctly assessed in isolation from *e*.

and this point must be emphasized, Smith inferred (iv) from (i). Disregarding this fact and isolating Smith's belief that (iv) from Smith's evidential basis (i) may, therefore, lead to an undesirable outcome. It is like asking Detective X whether or not she believes the result of her investigation (e.g., that Mr Y is the culprit) in the absence of the pieces of evidence that led her to arrive at such a result. Second, (i) plays a crucial role in Smith's belief that (iv). To be specific, Smith's belief that (iv) is *contingent* (or *dependent*) upon the evidence provided by (i). To substantiate this claim, it is sufficient to acknowledge that without the evidence from (i), we cannot adequately *explain why* Smith believes that (iv). Third, if (i) explains why Smith believes that (iv), this means that (i) plays a *constitutive role* in Smith's belief that (iv). Essentially, this means that Smith's belief that (iv) is the kind of belief that it is because of (i). Fourth, the logical relationship between Smith's belief that (iv) and (i) is the relationship between *two* things: on the one hand, we have the *proposition* believed to be true by Smith, and on the other, the *evidential basis* that Smith has for believing it. Fifth, and taking into account the points articulated above, a full specification of Smith's actual belief (AB) reveals that it has the following structure:

(AB) *S* believes that *p* because *e*.

Take note that 'e' in (AB) above refers to *S*'s evidential basis for believing that *p*. It is to be construed as an epistemic reason or ground for *S*'s belief that *p*. Take note as well how (AB) above sits well with the *most charitable interpretation* that we can provide for Smith's actual belief in Case I. To see this, we only need to replace the variables in (AB) to arrive at the following:

(AB*) Smith believes that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket (iv) because Jones will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket (i).

Sixth, I hope it is clear why (AB) presents a more complex picture compared to Gettier's own picture of what it means for *S* to believe that *p*. Take note that by fully specifying Smith's actual belief, we can easily see, for example, the kinds of relationships that are central to *epistemic justification*.⁸ To substantiate this claim, let us consider (AB*) above.

⁸ By 'epistemic justification,' I mean a form of justification that pertains to the rational support or grounds for the truth of a belief. It may aptly be described as truth-conducive. This differs from other types of justification, for example, pragmatic justification, which concerns whether holding a belief is useful or beneficial, rather than whether the belief is supported by evidence or reasons.

As we can easily see, (i) *supports* Smith's belief that (iv). In addition, (i) *explains* why Smith believes that (iv). One obvious advantage, therefore, of the approach and the argument that I am developing in this paper is that it is *informative* in the sense illustrated above. Seventh, and building up on the points that we discussed earlier, we can say that Smith's belief that (iv) is *inseparable* from Smith's evidential basis (i). To expound on this point, consider what I wish to call the 'Inseparability Argument' (IA) for *S*'s belief that *p* and *S*'s evidential basis, *e*, for believing that *p* in the following:

- (P1) *S* believes that *p* because *e*.
- (P2) If *S* believes that *p* because *e*, then *S*'s belief that *p* is inherently tied to and dependent on *e*.
- (C1) *S* cannot hold the belief that *p* without *e*.
- (C2) *S*'s belief that *p* and *e* are inseparable.

Recall that (P1) above corresponds to (AB) (i.e., *S*'s actual belief, or, to be more precise, the structure of *S*'s actual belief). Recall as well that (P1) (or (AB)) is the most charitable interpretation that we can provide for *S*'s actual belief in Case I. To demonstrate the validity of (IA), we can reason in the following way:

- (1) Assume the opposite of (C1), i.e., \sim (C1): *S* can hold the belief that *p* without *e*.
- (2) From (P1) and (P2), we can infer the following: *S*'s belief that *p* is inherently tied to and dependent on *e*.
- (3) If *S* can hold the belief that *p* without *e*, then *S*'s belief that *p* is not inherently tied to and dependent on *e*, which contradicts (2).
- (4) Therefore, the assumption in (1) above is false.
- (5) Therefore, the original conclusion, (C1), is true.
- (6) Consider (C2). From (2) above, we have established that *S*'s belief that *p* is inherently tied to and dependent on *e*.
- (7) From (5) above, we have established (C1).
- (8) From (6) and (7), we can infer (C2): *S*'s belief that *p* and *e* are inseparable.

It is important to note that (IA) can be stated in another way: when *S* believes that *p*, *S* believes more than the mere proposition in question, say, *p*. This is because *S*'s belief that *p* carries with it, *e*, its evidential basis. In my view, this inseparable relationship between *S*'s belief that *p* and *S*'s evidential basis *e* plays a crucial role in understanding how beliefs are *formed* and how they are *justified*.

4. Epistemic Justification: A Definition and a Pseudocode Algorithm

In this section, I will develop an argument that runs counter to (GI) (i.e., the view that Gettier's Case I and II present us with scenarios where S has a justified true belief that p but fails to know that p). In particular, I will demonstrate that in Gettier's Case I and in other cases that are structurally similar to it, S does not have a justified true belief that p to begin with. Therefore, the question as to whether or not S knows that p does not even arise. To support this claim, I propose the following definition of epistemic justification, which aligns closely with (AB) and (IA):

(EJ) S is justified in believing that p if and only if S 's evidential basis, e , for p is *consistent* with the relevant conditions (or circumstances), C , that, if satisfied, would make p true.

In (EJ), *consistency* refers to the relationship between S 's evidential basis e and the relevant conditions or circumstances C that would make the belief p true. In particular, e must align accurately with C , ensuring that S 's evidence genuinely supports and corresponds to the circumstances that validate p . This alignment is important since without it, we cannot distinguish justified beliefs from those that are merely coincidentally true or based on flawed reasoning. Consistency, therefore, ensures that S 's belief is both *credible* and *grounded* in reality. If (EJ) is correct, epistemic justification is not merely about S having strong evidence for believing that p . It is about S having evidence that coherently aligns with the relevant conditions or circumstances C that validate S 's belief that p . In the remainder of this section, I will apply (EJ) to Gettier's Case I to demonstrate that Smith's belief fails to meet this criterion, thereby undermining the claim that Smith has a justified true belief that p .

With the help of (EJ), we can develop a pseudocode algorithm to assess the justification status of Smith's belief in Gettier's Case I. This algorithm will help demonstrate whether Smith's belief that p meets the requirements for epistemic justification as defined by (EJ). First, let us specify the *input*:

S : Smith

p : The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket

e : Jones will get the job, Jones has ten coins in his pocket

C : Smith will get the job, Smith has ten coins in his pocket

Next, we provide the *procedure*:

- (1) Start.
- (2) Obtain Smith's belief status regarding p . If Smith believes that p , proceed to (3). If not, proceed to (7).
- (3) Check whether Smith's belief that p is true (i.e., it corresponds to reality) by checking if C (Smith will get the job, Smith has ten coins in his pocket) is satisfied. If p is true, proceed to (4). If not, proceed to (6).
- (4) Check if e (Jones will get the job, Jones has ten coins in his pocket) is consistent with C . If e is consistent with C , proceed to (5). If e is not consistent with C , proceed to (6).
- (5) Output: Smith is justified in believing that p . Proceed to (7).
- (6) Output: Smith is not justified in believing that p . Proceed to (7).
- (7) End.

As we can easily see from the pseudocode algorithm above, Smith, in Gettier's Case I, encounters a problem with Step (4). Here, e (Smith's evidential basis) is inconsistent with C , which leads to the following output in Step (6): Smith is not justified in believing that p . While this result certainly helps bolster the position that I am taking on the issue at hand, I would like to point out that (EJ) and the pseudocode algorithm for determining the justification status of Smith's belief that p provide us with a clear way by which such a belief *can* be justified. (EJ) and the pseudocode algorithm, therefore, count as *positive* contributions in our overall attempt to provide a workable theory of epistemic justification for beliefs involving empirical propositions.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated that in Gettier's Case I, it is plausible to maintain that S is not justified in believing that p to begin with. Consequently, the question as to whether or not S knows that p does not arise. The crucial move in the argumentative strategy that I employed is the full specification of the structure of S 's actual belief: S believes that p because e (AB). With (AB) in place, I developed an argument that shows that S 's belief that p and S 's evidential basis, e , for believing that p are inseparable (IA) from each other. By capitalizing on (AB) and (IA), a new definition of epistemic justification (EJ) emerged. This proposed

definition became the basis for the development of a pseudocode algorithm in order to determine the justification status of *S*'s belief.

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