

Completing Gettier

Working paper

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Abstract

In his famous paper *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, Edmund Gettier purports to show that “justified true belief” does not provide “sufficient conditions for someone’s knowing a given proposition.” This paper shows, while remaining strictly within the logical frame established by Gettier, relying on the meanings he uses, and without contradicting any of his claims, that Gettier’s argument implicitly utilizes a fourth condition for knowledge, which, when made explicit, demystifies his famous cases and provides a new set of conditions for knowledge with which his cases clearly comply.

Re-Stating Gettier

In this paper I have kept my analysis strictly limited to the conceptual space defined by Gettier’s *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* (from which all quotations are drawn) and have tried to be careful not to make any assumptions nor use any terms in a manner inconsistent with my good faith understanding of his text. In this sense, the object of my investigation here is not knowledge or justification, but rather the understandings of knowledge and justification as presented in Gettier’s paper.

I shall begin by briefly re-stating the core of Gettier’s argument so that I can refer to specific parts of it more easily. Gettier provides the following formalized version of a justified true belief definition of knowledge, which I shall refer to herein as “JTB”:

(a) S knows that P IFF (i.e., if and only if)

(i) P is true,

(ii) S believes that P, and

(iii) S is justified in believing that P.

He also asserts two further “points”, which I shall refer to formally as “Point 1” and “Point 2”.

Point 1, which is stated but then never referred to again, reads:

in that sense of “justified” in which S’s being justified in believing P is a necessary condition of S’s knowing that P, it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false.

Point 2, which I also refer to as the preservation of justification under logical implication, reads:

for any proposition P, if S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q.

Gettier’s objection to JTB is presented with two cases in which the application of the preservation of justification under logical implication (i.e. Point 2) creates a situation in which terms (i), (ii), and (iii) of JTB are satisfied, but in which Gettier states that the person “does not KNOW” that P.

For example, let us briefly re-state Gettier’s “Case I”. First, following Gettier *verbatim*, let

(d) be the proposition “Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket”, and

(e) be the proposition “the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket”

And, utilizing Greek letters to provide more clarity and precision, let Gettier’s additional premises be as follows:

- α Smith believes that (e) is true
- β Smith is justified in believing that (d)
- γ Smith has ten coins in his pocket and Smith does not know this
- δ Jones has ten coins in his pocket
- ϵ Smith is the one who will get the job

As Gettier correctly states, (d) logically implies (e). Thus, since Smith is justified in believing that (d) (i.e. β) and under the preservation of justification under logical implication (i.e. Point 2) the following is true:

- ζ Smith is justified in believing that (e)

Thus, as Gettier points out, all of the following conditions of JTB are true for Case I:

- (e) (i.e. “the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket” is true)
- α (i.e. Smith believes that (e) is true)
- ζ (i.e. Smith is justified in believing that (e))

Yet, as Gettier states (I shall refer to the following quotation in what follows as the “Conclusion”):

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.

In other words, Gettier is suggesting, in his use of the phrases and words “in virtue of” and “bases”, that Smith does not know that (e) because Smith’s justification for knowing (e) is itself (in terminology adopted for convenience in the present paper and intended to be strictly equivalent to Gettier’s) *not correct*, even though he is justified in believing that (e).

It is on the basis of this that Gettier concludes that JTB “does not state a sufficient condition for someone’s knowing a given proposition.”

Completing Gettier

To be able to untangle Gettier’s problems, we need, working strictly in accordance with the argument Gettier establishes and without contradicting him, to make explicit and clear certain key aspects of the argument Gettier leaves implicit and obscure.

First, we introduce the explicit quantifiers on “justification” to make explicit the concepts Gettier expresses using language such as “in virtue of” and “bases” that sit at the core of the Conclusion: we thus call “correct” justifications those which justify the truth or falsity of propositions “in virtue of” or “based” on acceptable/correct reasons in accordance with Gettier’s argument in the Conclusion, and “incorrect” justifications those which justify the truth or falsity of propositions “in virtue of” or “based” on unacceptable/incorrect reasons in accordance with Gettier’s argument in the Conclusion. Expressed in terms of these quantifiers, the key finding of the Conclusion can be restated: for a person to *know*, the justification itself *must be correct*. The actual conditions under which a justification may or may not be deemed correct is not within the scope of this paper; we have simply sought to inherit and clarify Gettier’s own claims and reasoning with respect to these concepts and conditions as revealed in his cases.

Why, then, didn't Gettier take a small additional step and simply augment JTB with his own conclusion, the requirement that the justification itself be correct? We can do so ourselves and call this amended set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge JTBC:

(a) S knows that P IFF (i.e., if and only if)

(i) P is true,

(ii) S believes that P,

(iii) S is justified in believing that P, and

(iv) the justification itself is correct

If Gettier were to have done so, both of his cases *would not* present a problem for the new definition, because in both cases (i), (ii), and (iii) would still be true but (iv) would be false, and so the subjects in each would not be said to *know*, either by Gettier or by JTBC.

One possibility is that Gettier's objective was showing the insufficiency of JTB, and having done so, he did not feel it necessary to make further claims or comments. However it is also possible, and indeed seems likely, that Gettier did not adopt JTBC because the new fourth requirement, for the justification to be correct, appears to contradict his Point 1 (although, as we will see, it does not). Indeed, this possibility is lent support by the fact that after stating Point 1, Gettier never explicitly refers to it again, and it is not clear what role it is intended to play or why he would have included in the paper if not to suggest that justifications do not, using our terminology, *need to be correct*, in order for persons to be justified in believing propositions. After all, Point 1 states, "it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false" and if (as is plainly true) the justification of any false proposition is necessarily incorrect (because the proposition is itself false), we can conclude that Point 1 implies that *it is*

possible for a person to be justified even if their justification is incorrect. On the basis of this, one might think that if a person *can* be justified but their justification still *be* incorrect, there cannot or should not also be a requirement, such as in the Conclusion and in (iv), that the justification itself *must* be correct. After all, if the justification *must be* correct, how would one explain the possibility of persons being justified in their belief of false propositions, established by Point 1?

While it seems to lurk in the background of Gettier's paper and explain the presence of Point 1, this line of argumentation is mistaken. The requirement in the Conclusion and in (iv) is *not* that the justification must be correct for the person to be *justified*, but rather that the justification must be correct for the person to *know*. It is in fact perfectly possible (Gettier's cases are clearly designed to exemplify precisely such situations) that a person be justified in believing a proposition *and* that their justification be incorrect. Given the logical structure established by Gettier, whether their justification is correct or incorrect implies nothing whatsoever about whether a person is justified, but whether their justification is correct or incorrect is in fact central (according to Gettier) to whether a person *knows*. Thus it is perfectly sensible not only that the fourth term be included, but that it be included completely apart from (iii), with which it has nothing to do.

Thus, both of Gettier's cases not only do *fail* JTBC, but JTBC is entirely consistent with Gettier's other assumptions, including especially Point 1. Furthermore, JTBC does provide sufficient conditions for someone to *know* a proposition in both cases I and II. Thus, we can see that Gettier has utilized but kept implicit what we have referred to as correct and incorrect

justifications and the fourth condition above, but that by making these explicit, there is in fact no mystery or difficulty whatsoever in his cases.

As to whether the manner in which Gettier understands and uses key concepts and terms like knowledge, justification, “in virtue of”, etc. is correct or not, which has also been the topic of much scholarly debate, is a different question entirely, one that is outside the scope of this paper.

Works Cited

Gettier, Edmund L. *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, *Analysis*, Volume 23, Issue 6, 1 June 1963, Pages 121–123, <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/23.6.121>