

## The Gettier Argument: What it Shows, and What it Doesn't

Caleb Gordon

Edmund Gettier presents an argument meant to reject the Platonic definition of "knowledge" as "justified true belief." The goal of his argument is to show that despite having all of these components - having a belief which is demonstrably true and justified - that we fail to achieve real Knowledge about reality. The cases he presents are meant to illustrate instances where a person holds certain "justified true beliefs" yet clearly fails to comprehend reality in its truest form.

But Gettier makes a crucial mistake in his presentation – he takes the assumption that Smith would identify certain propositions as “true” to demonstrate the validity of his logical form. The problem is that the kind of “truth” Smith acknowledges is not the same as the type derived from predicate logic. Gettier presents a valid logical proposition:

- (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.

There isn't anything wrong with this logical description of “knowledge.” The issues arise when the variables are replaced with real-world events: Smith, his beliefs, and their justification. The logical definition of knowledge is intuitive. In layman's terms, we wouldn't say a person “knows” something simply because they “believe” it, even if it ultimately turns out to be “true” – we'd simply respond to their claim of enlightenment by saying, “Well, even though it turned out that way, you didn't really *know* it would.” We say this when we see no reason for a person to believe something; we say it when they make a claim without presenting evidence, or per the example, “justification.” In the logical proposition, this would be the failure of condition (iii). Likewise, when a person has reason to believe something and *does*, we do not say that they had knowledge if events transpire which contradict their expectations; they can certainly claim to have a belief, and they might even present evidence to us that we too find convincing – Smith and I may be sharing an expectation based on some compelling set of evidence, but ultimately be surprised at the outcome, at which point I might turn to Smith and say, “Well, I guess we didn't know what was going to happen,” and this would indicate the failure of condition (i). There is little to explain for condition (ii); if someone doesn't believe something to be true despite evidence *and* that given fact being “the actual case,” we're more inclined to label them “willfully ignorant” than “possessing knowledge, unbeknownst to himself.”

The logical form, therefore, conforms to our intuitive understanding of the word “language.” Gettier's task is to demonstrate that events can transpire which adhere to this form while failing to produce knowledge; that a person can have a belief which is true and justified while yet deviating from reality. But Gettier does this by mixing logical truths with empirical ones; no object or event *is* bounded by logical stricture – we analyze them through logic's application, and the purpose of that analysis is to qualify their definition. To say that “knowledge” is attained by satisfying the proposition “justified true belief” is to ask whether some thing claiming to be “knowledge” falls in line with the logical form. Gettier suggests that the form can be followed without producing knowledge – but his examples' adherence to that form is illusory. In all of his examples, he presents statements which can reasonably be assented to, and he takes that fact that Smith *would* assent to them as proof positive that the form fails. But in his examples, Smith assents to a logical proposition in a context completely irrelevant to what the proposition regards; in one, Smith takes a statement such as “the man with ten coins in his pockets will be hired” as a truth, but not because having coins in one's pockets has *anything* to do with what primarily concerns him. In the other, Smith assents to a statement “Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona” not because he believes *anything* about Brown's location, but because he has no justification to *disbelieve* the proposition “Jones owns a Ford.”

It may be helpful to then recontextualize the examples by referring to Smith's verbal dispositions than the logical propositions he assents to – the logical propositions are not assented to on account of their logical form, but what Smith takes them to *mean* – but Gettier ignores this, and takes Smith's assent to qualify the given propositions for re-insertion into the logical definition of “knowledge,” where they then fail. As W.V. Quine describes them, “verbal dispositions” are the physiological states of a brain which correspond to its application of language. Language is, in its functional form, a type of behavior; Writes Quine: “Dispositions to behavior, then, are physiological states or traits or mechanisms. In citing them dispositionally we are signaling them out by behavioral symptoms, behavioral tests.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, a disposition towards certain verbal utterances is not equivalent to any particular logical structure, but rather the communication of a particular association. Thus a verbal disposition would not contain syntax – it is purely semantic. Gettier is taking Smith's assent to statements syntactically at odds with the logical definition of “knowledge” as evidence against it, but all he is really doing is coming up with propositions which Smith has no reason to suspect the motivation for, and thus assents

---

1 W.V. Quine, “Minds and Verbal Dispositions,” in *Quintessence*, ed. Roger F. Gibson, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 323

to because he believes their meaning to relate to his current situation. He doesn't assent to them on the basis of the logical form, which is Gettier's interest, but because they equate, roughly, to his own verbal dispositions. When asked, "Do you assent to statement x?" Smith replies, "Yes." It doesn't mean he would have composed it in the form it takes – that is what Gettier does. Quine describes a person's thoughts (where we would expect to find "knowledge") as largely being composed of the amalgamation of their verbal dispositions:

"We have to examine relations of interdependence between verbal dispositions: systematic interdependencies between dispositions to assent to standing sentences and dispositions to assent in certain circumstances to observation sentences...It is a question of the relation of standing sentences to observation sentences, and hence nothing less than the relation of scientific theory to scientific evidence."<sup>2</sup>

Gettier takes what are essentially observation sentences and then uses them as standing sentences in his example, thus distorting their original form – the verbal disposition which corresponded to his assent.

Gettier provides a narrative:

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 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.

The problem with this case that it is either intentionally misleading, or inexcusably vague about the

---

<sup>2</sup> W.V. Quine, "Minds and Verbal Dispositions," in *Quintessence*, ed. Roger F. Gibson, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 320

most critical point of the example - the exact words the president spoke to Smith. Gettier tries to evade this necessary detail by assuring us that “the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected,” leaving us with exactly the same kind of vagueness Smith evidently encountered. If the president told Smith “Jones will be hired” he has blatantly lied; Smith's expectation that the other man will be hired is founded on the basic association between a name and an object; if the president has told him this, there is no reason to say that Smith's belief is true – his belief is justified on account of his faith in his language, but the president exploits this in misleading him.

Similarly, even if what the president said was more generic – You might imagine the president tells Smith, “The man with two coins in his pocket will get the job” – Smith is still being misled, whether intentionally or incidentally. If the president doesn't know Jones has ten coins in his pocket, but somehow knows what Smith doesn't, his statement “The man with ten coins in his pocket will get the job,” which causes Smith to look wistfully in Jones' direction, is actually a situation where Smith takes “man” to refer to “Jones” on account of that explanation conforming to best evidence: If the president had known both men possessed ten coins, he is again being misleading by saying “the” man with ten coins in his pocket will get the job,” as “the” is a singular term and both Smith and Jones expect there to be only one hiring; even if incidental, the president's proposition, by its grammatical form and in conjunction with Smith's evidence, leads Smith to believe Jones will be hired.

It is not so much that he believes the statement “the man with ten coins in his pocket will be hired” as that he believes that the president is describing Jones given the context. If he is asked, “Do you think the man with ten coins will be hired?” he will reply, “Yes, that is what I have been told.” But his belief is contingent on something Gettier does not address – his belief, exacerbated by the president's grammar, that he does not possess ten coins in his own pocket. Thus the problem does not actually even go the way Gettier would like it to – If Smith is using his evidence to form a belief, evidence left out is equally worthy of consideration as positive evidence such as examining the contents of Jones' pockets. Smith thus does not have a “justified true belief;” his acceptance of the president's description of the new hire is simply a matter of taking the president to mean “I will hire Jones.” Thus believing “The man with ten coins in his pocket will get the job” is secondary to the point of the president expressing the proposition in the first place; he meant to tell Smith that Smith would be hired, but Smith took it to mean that Jones would be hired based on two levels of miscommunication which transpired to form the illusion of a truth, unless the president is just being a sadistic tease. Therefore Smith does not have a “justified true belief” at all – he has interpreted “the man with ten coins in his pocket” as “Jones” in the

context of the conversation. The number of coins in a pocket are entirely irrelevant to the situation but to identify one of the men; as its utterance imparts an impression upon Smith which is not true. So Smith has a “justified false belief” - or in other words, he does not know who is going to be hired. Gettier has made a mistake in setting up his example: the “evidence” he offers as the foundation for Smith's “justification” is a false belief based on miscommunication.

Gettier's second example goes as follows:

Let us suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following proposition:

(f) Jones owns a Ford.

Smith's evidence might be that Jones has at all times in the past within Smith's memory owned a car, and always a Ford, and that Jones has just offered Smith a ride while driving a Ford. Let us imagine, now, that Smith has another friend, Brown, of whose whereabouts he is totally ignorant. Smith selects three places at random and constructs the following three propositions:

(g) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston.

(h) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.

(i) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Brest-Litovsk.

Each of these propositions is entailed by (f). Imagine that Smith realizes the entailment of each of these propositions he has constructed by (f), and proceeds to accept (g), (h), and (i) on the basis of (f). Smith has correctly inferred (g), (h), and (i) from a proposition for which he has strong evidence. Smith is therefore completely justified in believing each of these three propositions. Smith, of course, has no idea where Brown is.

But imagine now that two further conditions hold. First, Jones does not own a Ford, but is at present driving a rented car. And secondly, by the sheerest coincidence, and entirely unknown to Smith, the place mentioned in proposition (h) happens really to be the place where Brown is. If these two conditions hold, then Smith does not KNOW that (h) is true, even though (i) (h) is true, (ii) Smith does not believe that (h) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (h) is true.

This second example commits a similar error to the first – Gettier's formulation asks to reader to grant that Smith is “completely justified in believing each of these three propositions.” I don't think it makes any sense to say Smith is “completely” justified when by the very nature of the problem is it clear that he does not have access to all relevant information. Gettier means that the evidence Smith *does* have is correct; he *has* always known Jones to own a Ford, and Jones *did* just pick him up in a Ford – this certainly does not *contradict* Smith's belief that Jones owns a Ford, but it neither reinforces it; the example is a question of present states – Jones' status as a current Ford owner and Brown's current location. The fact that Jones *has* owned Fords is obviously not sufficient evidence that he *still* owns Fords; the fact that he picked up Smith in a fort is *not* evidence that he *does not* own a Ford, despite

latently reinforcing Smith's belief that Jones *currently* owns a Ford. The fact that someone's false belief has yet to be disproven shouldn't be equated to "complete justification." Smith doesn't consider the statement "Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona" as a logical dichotomy – that is not his mode of assent. *In* assenting, in the context of the example, he makes absolutely no connection between Jones' Ford ownership and Brown being in Barcelona; the verbal disposition which corresponds with his assent is more analogous to "Yes, I believe Jones owns a Ford."

From here, it is a simple matter to say that again, Gettier hasn't actually shown "justified true belief" to be a poor definition of knowledge, he has simply demonstrated another situation where an individual may *believe* that he has a "justified true belief" when he does not.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we "justify" something, we are providing some kind of evidence for why some proposition ought to be regarded as "true." If we are accused of moral misbehavior, we provide evidence for why another person should accept our action as acceptable rather than condemning it; "justification" is an action which occurs between rational beings wherein one communicates information which brings the others' conscious set into agreement with his own. Whether rational or empirical, "justification" is the *presentation* of some evidence – importantly, it need not be all evidence. To "justify" some proposition, then, is not to establish a proposition as immune to disagreement; it is rather the process by which we attempt to *resolve* disagreement.

To return to "truth": we established two kinds. There is the kind of abstract "Truth" which we regard ontologically as "whichever statements communicate the nature of reality with total precision." Then there is a "truth" which refers to a person's verbal behavior corresponding with the verbal dispositions they hold in tandem with certain objects, whether those objects be structures or relationships between structures. We know that their verbal dispositions may not correspond with verbal dispositions held by someone with greater access to the objects in question; thus one's perception of an event may be reconstructed verbally in accordance to the perceived geometric structure of a "Truth," but in its incompleteness communicate a meaning contradictory to the real set. For we do think of a world in terms of physics – if we speak of someone telling a lie, we are saying that the object they describe (object X *must* be geometrically appreciable to exist, even if only a location respective to objects Y and Z) does not exist; the motions or structures they describe have no physical correlate.

When we "justify" something, then, we are perhaps talking about alignment – we draw someone's attention to other objects for the sake of reinforcing the picture we wish them to hold. We do not have access to "Truth," because we know it only by an ontological description. We have access to "truth" by definition of what it is – we understand ourselves to understand "truth" as well as we understand the description of it, which then is merely a question of how well one has mastered the translation of a given describer's verbal proposition - in this paper, I have already provided a description of "truth," and the efficacy of my argument is contingent on the degree to which a reader's interpretation of that definition matches my own verbal dispositions. So I say: When a proposition is "justified," the objects it references are accepted into a mind's lexicon as "true."

We speak of "knowledge" defined as "justified true belief." "Beliefs" are simply the propositions we hold as "true" - the undefined set of verbal dispositions which correspond to the shapes or motions, whether perceived directly or by communication, which we believe to most closely resemble "Truth." "Justification" and "truth" are thus interrelated; "justification" is the process of establishing "truth." "Belief" and "truth" are similarly interdependent; "truth" is a term that is only applicable to sentences, and it is the standard by which we evaluate the accuracy of one's sentences in regard to their verbal dispositions.

So as a definition for "knowledge," "justified true belief" suffices. It is merely that to have justification does not mean to have certainty, and to be true does not mean to be exact; if we are talking about "True" belief, such as knowledge of how a mathematical system operates, we are not talking about the kind of case Gettier presents to disprove the definition; his examples are all of the empirical variety – that of the lower-case "truth." His example wouldn't work if his characters were doing arithmetic. Gettier's examples do not show that "knowledge" does not exist, for clearly the definition of the word can be communicated in a way that begets a convergence of verbal dispositions between two members of a language. Rather, he has shown that by its definition, if we examine what we mean by each part, that "knowledge" is something eternally incomplete and fallible.