Tolerance Towards Gettier-type Counterexamples

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Keywords: Knowledge, JTB account, Gettier-type counterexample.

Abstract. Although the JTB account for knowledge is challenged by Gettier-type counterexamples, we could still grasp the concept of knowledge by means of it. After thinking some modifications and reconsiderations to this account over, I found that they cannot clear up Gettier-type counterexamples at all. Such counterexamples arise because of the independence between truth and justification, which is due to the essential structure of knowledge. However, for the purpose of epistemology, we could still adopt a certain kind of ostensive definition for knowledge such as the JTB account.

Introduction

The orthodoxy JTB account defines knowledge as follows: an epistemic agent S knows a proposition P if and only if

1. P is true;
2. S believes that P;
3. S is justified in believing that P.

In 1963, Gettier presented two cases in which the conditions above are satisfied, yet the agent S in question fails to know that proposition P. This counterexample unfolded that conditions in the JTB account are not sufficient to explain knowledge. Since then, many epistemologists have tried to adjust the JTB account. They mainly focused on condition (3) which is the most controversial and flexible one in a long-standing debate. People who believe that Gettier-type counterexamples can be avoided attempt to add a forth condition, such as Goldman's causal theory and Defeasibility. Whereas those who do not that endorse the (3) justification condition try to modify it or directly use another substitutive condition. On the other hand, other people hold that Gettier-type counterexamples are inescapable in essence so that the JTB account is logically unreasonable. There is an original claim behind this strategy: The JTB account can be reasonable (i.e. can properly define knowledge), if and only if Gettier-type counterexamples can be avoidable. (Claim 1.1) Thus they insist to give up the core of the JTB approach and look for a totally different one. Let us explore whether they succeed and moreover whether knowledge can be defined.

The Inevitability of Gettier-type Counterexamples

As mentioned above, some philosophers think that Gettier-type counterexamples are essentially inevitable or inescapable under the JTB account.

Zagzebski argued that Gettier problems arise in the theory of knowledge when it is only by chance that a justified belief is true. Bad luck, which makes the agent fail to know P occasionally, could be cancelled by an accident of good luck, which make the truth be regained occasionally. The relation between justification and truth is close but not inviolable. She made investigations respectively on the internal notion of justification. Internalists strengthen the justification by limiting it as warranted belief, which is produced in the agent S’s mind by S's faculties working properly in the appropriate environment, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. Yet they does not maintain that every warranted belief (reliably formed, internally justified) is true. That is, people do not have to be perfectly cautious and have perfect vision to have beliefs sufficiently warranted. Besides, Levy indicated that for S to know that P, there must be no other evidence
against P which is strong enough to undermine S’s belief P. It requires that the belief in question must also be justified in certain counterfactual situations. But still, as long as the concept of knowledge closely connects the justification and the truth, while permits some degree of independence between them, justified true belief will never be sufficient for knowledge.

Via a more formalized way, Floridi proved that Gettier-type counterexamples are logically insolvable. He claimed that Gettier-type counterexamples can be solved only if a successful coordination of the resources (truth and justification) is sufficient and necessary to deliver proposition that S knows P can be solved. But the truth and justification happen to be not only independent, but alsoopaquely unrelated, i.e. they happen to fail to converge the same propositional content in a relevant and significant way without the agent’s realizing. Floridi reaches a stronger conclusion that the JTB account is irreparable in principle, any efforts to improve it can never succeed.

As a result, we have to admit the inescapability of Gettier-type counterexample. Zagzebski have displayed our alternatives:

1) Give up the independence, i.e. “S is justified in believing P” entails P. Few philosophers have supported it, but it is intuitively wrong.

2) Stick to the almost complete independent. On this view, the element of luck permitted in the state of knowledge is so great that alleged counterexamples based on luck do not count against it.

3) Hold that knowledge is true belief plus something ("x"). The "x" ought to be one that has a strong connection with the acquisition of truth. But an inviolable connection would be impossible.

Various Reconsiderations to Knowledge

Could we have more alternatives except for Zagzebski’s? Perhaps we have some brand-new reconsiderations to knowledge which do not refer to truth or justification. Yet by comparing to the traditional JTB account, I find that neither of them can be out of the JTB account so that Gettier-type counterexample are still here.

Firstly, Lewis does not agree that the mark of knowledge is justification. On one hand, he argues that justification is not sufficient by the lottery case. Suppose the agent knows that it is a fair lottery with one winning ticket and many losing tickets and he knows how many losing tickets there are. The greater the number of losing tickets, the better is his justification for believing he will lose. Yet this cannot be transferred into infallible knowledge because he just might win. On the other hand, thinking about how reliable our perception, memory, and testimony are, we will find justification is not always necessary. And sometimes we would forget the reasons for gaining certain knowledge. Therefore, not by raising the standards of justification that epistemology destroys knowledge, we need a different story. However, He just shows us again that the independence between truth and justification is existing rather than breaks the link between knowledge and justification.

Then Lewis gives knowledge the modal explanation: The agent S knows P if and only if P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S's evidence; equivalently, if and only if S’s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-P. And we can properly ignore the possibilities. He gives some rules (Rules of Actuality, Belief, Resemblance, Reliability and Conservation) to tell us what possibilities we may not properly ignore. In fact, the rule of Actuality and Belief correspond to the first two conditions of JTB account. While the Rule of Resemblance and Reliability are just a sort of adjustment to the justification condition. It is by means of these two rules that we capture what is right about causal or reliable theories of knowledge. Literally, Lewis’s reconsideration is using modal logic method to bring a more formalized JTB account for knowledge so that it will encounter the Gettier problem as well.

Besides this, some philosophers think that knowledge is too cheap, unimpressive and ambiguous while understanding is more transparent or reflectively accessible than knowledge. Grimm tries to isolate understanding’s components as three properties: object, psychology and normative. He points out that the objects of understanding are dependence relations, like a kind of causal maps. For example, the state of spilled water depends on some other relevant states, such as a broken glass, a boy who bumps the glass, an overslippery table top. One key feature of these maps is that they are
mobile and dynamic, in the sense that the variables can take on different values, e.g. the boy does not bump the glass and the table top is not slippery, just the glass is broken itself. Naturally, the map needs to be accurate to yield understanding. The psychology of understanding is grasping. One must see how varying the value of one of the variables will lead (or fail to lead) to a change in the value of another variables. What he needs to grasp is the dependencies or the causal structure. In addition to having an accurate grasp of the world, all that is needed is that one’s attitude be subjectively justified, that is, the agent should know why or how he understands something.\textsuperscript{[8]}

The analysis of understanding is based on the JTB account eventually. It is closed to internalism and reliablism and also faces the problems they face. To ensure the accuracy of grasp, we still need to clarify what we mean when speaking of being subjectively justified. Although we can look understanding as a higher level of knowledge or believe in its transparence, the account is not out of JTB scope, or just appealing to the JTB account’s framework. Thus the transfer from knowledge to understanding could not escape Gettier-type counterexamples.

Is Knowledge Undefinable?

Actually, Gettier-type counterexamples root in the intrinsic nature of knowledge. Brent regards knowledge as a thick concept which has a thick structure. In a common view, a term expresses a thick concept if it expresses a concept with evaluative and significant non-evaluative content. For example, “murder” expresses some evaluative contents (e.g. wrong) and non-evaluative contents (e.g. deliberating killing). Roughly, knowledge is a thick or “two-level” concept that somehow combine both evaluative (justified) and non-evaluative (true belief) content. Another term “Vertical luck” is defined as follows: An agent's belief is vertically luck in case it's a matter of luck that agent's belief is true. Gettier-type counterexamples reveal that “Vertical luck” is compatible with justification but incompatible with knowledge in general.\textsuperscript{[9]} We are rather entitled to a bolder conclusion that the Gettier-type counterexamples are inevitable not only under the JTB account but also under all kinds of account of knowledge for the intrinsic thick structure of knowledge. Further, the problem is, will we draw a frustrating and absurd conclusion that knowledge is undefinable in line with Claim 1.1? Or even head for the skepticism? The answer is definitely no. Knowledge is definable and can be defined by some ostensive accounts, including the JTB or other accounts in acceptable range.

As we all know, there are various types of definitions, all with different purposes and focuses. For instance, definitions in mathematics, the basis on which all of math axioms and rules is constructed, are used to give precise meaning to new terms. Generally, Internal definition, and ostensive definition are three main and important categories of definition. Internal definitions convey the meaning of a term by human’s rational mind, external definitions by referring to some objects, and ostensive definition by pointing out examples. It is always hard to thoroughly clarify a basic concept like knowledge in philosophy. In that case, what we adopt here, not as strictly as in mathematics, could be ostensive definition. Therefore, Knowledge is definable in philosophy if and only if there is an account that can be an ostensive definition of it. That is, it can help us find out positive examples satisfying the common understanding of knowledge. (Remark: Counterexample are not be rejected rigidly here)

Firstly, the existence of such-and-such accounts is easy to get, as is shown in preceding parts, we already have the JTB account and some modifications and reconsiderations to knowledge, merely without regard to their drawbacks for the moment, anyway. Then all we need to do is to check whether those accounts can be ostensive definition. Obviously, we can find many positive examples meeting the triple conditions in the JTB account or conditions in any other accounts such that knowledge is illustrated or described properly. It is sufficient now to refute the idea from Claim 1.1 that if it is impossible to say there is no Gettier-type counterexamples at all, any kinds of account of knowledge cannot be reasonable, i.e. they cannot define knowledge.

Let me recapitulate. There is an inevitable gap between truth and justification, or sometimes, we should resort to the luck to know something. That’s why the accounts of knowledge encounter challenges. However, knowledge is a fault-tolerance concept, or say that it is a Gettier-type
counterexamples-tolerance concept. The point emphasized here is to pursue the truth, which is no other than the value of knowledge and the goal of epistemology. In another word, what we need to strive for is to shrink the gap. Generally speaking, all of the modification of the JTB account and all of reconsiderations to knowledge are significant, for they help us get closer to the understanding of truth at least. We are quite clear about why Gettier-type counterexamples arise, which is meaningful enough. You may clear up Gettier-type counterexamples only by studying the world from God's point of view, it is not bad, however, to bear with those counterexamples. Anyway, for the sake of exploring the world, the pivotal value is that we know what we know, what we lack of and what we have to go after. In another word, there is no need to be too harsh when speaking of what is knowledge at all.

Acknowledgement
This research was financially supported by the National Society and Science Foundation (18ZDA031).

References