

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Handout 3: Responses to the Gettier Problem

Gettier case: example of a subject with JTB that p who doesn't know that p.

First strategy for JTB theorist: deny that Gettier case is a counterexample to JTB theory.

Either: Deny that Gettier subjects have justified beliefs that p.

Or: Say that Gettier subjects know that p.

Second strategy: modify the JTB analysis. We'll look at three examples of this strategy:

1. No False Grounds Theory (NFG)

JTB+NFG theory adds a fourth condition: that all of S's grounds for believing that P are true.

Gettier's original cases are not counterexamples to JTB+NFG

But are there Gettier cases where NFG is satisfied? Maybe:

Modified Nogot case from Feldman, "An Alleged Defect..."

Russell's stopped clock case.

Response from JTB+NFG proponent: grounds aren't just those beliefs you consciously use in reasoning, but also the background beliefs you presuppose in your reasoning. So in those cases there *is* a false ground:

Modified Nogot: *Nogot owns a Ford*

Stopped clock: *this clock is not stopped*

Response from JTB+NFG opponent: this move makes the theory too strong. What if you see twenty clocks, all of which say that it's 5:00, but only one of them is stopped? There you know, but your belief presupposes that *none of the clocks are stopped*, and that's false. Right? (See also Feldman, 33, 'Extra Reasons Case'.)

2. No Defeaters Theory (ND)

JTB+ND theory adds a fourth condition: that there is no defeater for S's justification.

Defeater: true proposition q such that if S learned q, she would no longer be justified in believing that p (compare Lehrer & Paxson 228, Feldman 34)

Original Gettier cases, Modified Nogot, and stopped clock all have defeaters. So far so good for JTB+ND.

But there are *misleading defeaters*. Tom Grabit case (Lehrer & Paxson 228-9, Feldman 35). JTB+ND implies, absurdly, that you don't know even when there are only misleading defeaters out there.

Response from JTB+ND: require only that there are no misleading defeaters. But what does this mean?

3. No Essential Falsehoods Theory (NEF)

JTB+NEF is a refinement of JTB+NFG. It adds the fourth condition: that S's justification for P does not essentially depend on any falsehood

This may get around modified stopped clock. But what does "essentially depend" mean? Feldman says this notion is "reasonably clear". Is he right?

Also, there may be counterexamples. From Brian Skyrms (Lehrer & Paxson 227):

Pete knows that:

(1) Sure-Fire matches have always lit in the past when struck.

(2) The match he is holding is a Sure-Fire match.

On this basis he believes that

(3) The match he is holding will light when struck.

He strikes the match, and it lights. So his belief that (3) is justified and true. But unbeknownst to Pete, the match he is holding is defective, and would not have lit when struck except that purely by chance, just as he struck the match, a sudden burst of Q-radiation ignited it.

Claim: Pete didn't know that (3), though he had a JTB that (3) that didn't essentially depend on any falsehoods. If correct then the case is a counterexample to JTB+NEF.

The Upshot

Many modifications to JTB have been proposed in response to Gettier cases; JTB+NFG, JTB+ND, and JTB+NEF are three prominent examples. None is widely regarded as successful, though there are defenders of each.

Another response to Gettier cases is to more radically modify the analysis of knowledge. We'll look at some alternative analyses starting on Sept. 16.

Another Question About Pete

One way to respond to Pete's case is to deny that he had a JB in (3). Does knowing (1) and (2) give you justification to believe (3)? This leads naturally to the question we'll start exploring next week:

What is a justified belief?