

A Critique of Gettier's Argument

Habib Türker*

Until when Gettier published his article, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", knowledge had widely been defined as justified true belief (JTB) in Western philosophical traditions. Accordingly, knowledge consists of justification, truth and belief. The notion of the Gettier argument is that JTB is not sufficient for knowledge. The argument that Gettier proposed is the most influential attack on the JTB definition. For many epistemologists, the Gettier cases are not challengeable as a genuine counter-example to JTB. This paper tries to indicate the aspects of Gettier's argument, which are criticizable. The Gettier problem originates from the accident or luck of justification and truth. It appears impossible to find a solution to the Gettier cases from an internalist perspective. However, we have to designate that classical epistemology does distinguish knowledge from doxa. Accordingly, the knowledge intended by Gettier is not the knowledge intended by the ancient philosophers, but doxa. Therefore, the Gettier cases are not counter-examples to the classical definition in this sense. However, we are aware that it is very difficult to arrive at conclusive reasons in every state, and such a notion would be too restrictive.

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Since the publication of a short article by Edmund Gettier in 1963, scholars have been attempting to answer the cases put forward. Epistemologists and many scholars were surprised and believed that the cases Gettier posed were unchallengeable, and that they changed the course of epistemology, making it impossible to define knowledge as justified true belief. This paper does not intend to disprove the cases proposed by Gettier, but rather tries to indicate the aspects of Gettier's argument, which it is possible to criticize. Up until the time that Gettier published his article knowledge had widely been defined as justified true belief (JTB) in Western philosophical traditions (Greek, Islamic, etc). Accordingly, knowledge consists of justification, truth and belief.

* Dr., Fatih University, The Department of Philosophy. I would like to thank Ömer Türker for his helpful comments on my critiques of the Gettier cases.

The notion of the Gettier argument is that JTB is not sufficient for knowledge. The argument that Gettier proposed was the most influential attack on the JTB definition, which is the reason why many epistemologists attempted to solve the problem that these cases posed. For many epistemologists, the Gettier cases are not challengeable as a genuine counter-example to JTB. The following are original examples from E. Gettier.

The first argument:

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 the 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.¹

According to Gettier, this example shows that the three conditions for the traditional definition of knowledge are not jointly sufficient, although they are necessary. We may have justification, truth and belief, yet, we may not have knowledge.

I think Gettier's first argument could be criticized from the point of the denotation. Gettier converts a singular proposition to an indefinite proposition. Using the indefiniteness of the denotation of an indefinite proposition he validates a proposition which is indeed not valid only for Jones, but also for Smith, and from this he infers a universal conclusion.

d. Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Proposition (d) is a definite singular proposition, and Smith's belief is about Jones, not about anyone else. Afterwards Smith establishes another proposition:

1 Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge", *Analysis*, 23 (1963), pp. 122-23.

e. The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Proposition (e) is an indefinite proposition, and Smith's belief is not about Jones, but anyone who will get the job. That man can be any man who has applied for the job. Normally the evidence of Smith is valid for Jones, because proposition (d) applies to Jones, not to Smith himself, or anyone else. The evidence for Jones is applied to everyone by converting a definite proposition to an indefinite proposition. Having applied for the job and been selected, Smith happens to have justified true belief because of the indefinite proposition. As can be seen here, there is no justification. If there is an indefinite proposition then the situation is applicable to anyone, not only to Smith. But the evidence in the example is not for Smith, but for Jones, but the evidence about Jones does not justify the belief in the case of Smith; that is, the evidence about Jones cannot be evidence for Smith or for anyone else. Additionally, Gettier claims that proposition (d) entails (e); but propositions (d) and (e) are different from one another. The first one is a definite singular proposition, while the second is an indefinite proposition. Indefinite propositions are neither singular nor universal and particular, as denotations of singular, particular and universal propositions are definite. When I say, "A human being is bad", the denotation of this proposition is indefinite. This kind of proposition is different from singular (Serdar is bad), particular (some human beings are bad) and universal (all human beings are bad) propositions, although the meaning of (e) is partly implied by (d), because Jones is the man who will get the job. However "The man" in proposition (e) is not Jones, but anyone who will get the job. Therefore proposition (d) does not exactly entail proposition (e).

The second argument:

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 place names quite 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 coin-

vidence, 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 believe that (h) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (h) is true.²

The second argument is a kind of disjunctive proposition and formally true. In a disjunctive proposition only one of the disjuncts can be true. Smith constructs a proposition for which he has strong evidence, so he believes that (f) is true. This implies that Smith does not believe that the other disjuncts are true. A disjunctive proposition does not actually assert that (s) is true or that (t) is true, but rather it says that one or the other of them is true. It seems that Smith does not believe that the other disjuncts (“Brown is in Boston” or “Brown is in Barcelona” or “Brown is in Brest-Litovsk”) are true, but he believes only that Jones owns a Ford. Yet it is accidentally true that Brown is in Barcelona. In this case the disjunctive syllogism would be as follows:

Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona
Jones does not own a Ford
Then Brown is in Barcelona

But Smith does not believe that Brown is in Barcelona. Therefore proposition (h) lacks belief. Even though in the end it appears that the first disjunct has justified belief but lacks truth, the second disjunct has truth, but lacks justification and belief. Therefore, the conditions of JTB are not completely held in the second argument.

Catherine Lowy strongly contends that the Gettier examples demonstrate that the notion of justification is not sufficient for knowledge. The objections directed against the Gettier examples demonstrate the failure of the writers.³ In order to avoid some of the misleading complexities of the original example, Lowy presents the example of Keith Lehrer, who follows the pattern of Gettier’s example as a counter-example to the JTB definition against the critiques of Meyers and Stern. “Mr. Nogot tells Smith that he owns a Ford and even shows him a certificate to that effect. Up till now Nogot has always been reliable and honest in his dealing with Smith. S believes on these good grounds that Nogot who is in his office owns a Ford (p). From this belief S deduces that someone in his office owns a Ford (q). But the fact is that Nogot does not own a Ford, while Havit who is also in S’s office does. Here S is justified in believing, and believes truly, that someone in his office owns a Ford, but does not know that someone in his office owns a Ford.”⁴

2 Edmund L. Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge”, pp. 122-23.

3 Catherine Lowy, “Gettier’s Notion of Justification”, *Mind*, new series, 87/345 (1978), pp. 105-108.

4 See Robert G. Meyers and Kenneth Stern, “Knowledge Without Paradox”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70/6 (1973), p. 151; Lowy, “Gettier’s Notion of Justification”, p. 106.

I think there is no difference between the example of Gettier and that of Lehrer. Our critique of Gettier's examples is valid for that of Keith Lehrer. Both Gettier and Lehrer convert a definite proposition to an indefinite proposition. Proposition (p) is a singular and definite proposition, and S's belief is about Nogot. Proposition (q) is an indefinite proposition, and this is not about Nogot, but about anyone who is in the office. Lehrer, as Gettier does, makes valid a proposition about Nogot, and about everyone, including Havit. S's evidence (certificate) is about Nogot, not about Havit. Lehrer employs the evidence for Nogot for everyone in the office, converting a definite proposition into an indefinite proposition. Hence, it appears that the example of Lehrer also fails to have justification.

But, what can we do with this simple kind of Gettier example? This example does not have the problems that arise from the denotations of the propositions. Suppose that Serdar was found guilty of murder. Consequently, he was put in a dark cell with no light. Since Serdar stayed in this dark prison cell for a while, he was not aware of the passage of time; in other words, he did not know what day it was or what time it was. After serving his time in the isolated and dark prison cell, he was transferred to an ordinary section of the prison. He looked through the window and was able to see the sun; the position of the sun indicated that it was midday. Thus, Serdar inferred that it was midday. Meanwhile he heard *sala*, the call to prayer for the communal Friday prayer, which is recited at midday. He thus infers that it was Friday. The justification of his inference is the position of the sun and the *sala*. Indeed it was Friday, yet the *sala* was not for Friday, but rather to announce a death. Actually Serdar did not know that it was Friday. According to Gettier, Serdar owned "justified" (by the position of the sun and *sala*) "true" (it was really Friday) "belief" (he believed that), but indeed he did not know that it was Friday.

In this example, the belief is true, for there is a correspondence between the belief of Serdar and the object of the belief. He believes that it is Friday and it is really Friday. Here the following question is raised: can the evidence about (A) play a justificatory role about the belief (B)? If one answers this in the negative, Serdar would not have evidence for his belief because it is about the Friday prayer, but the evidence is about a death - that is, the context is different. Classical definition suggests justification, but this case lacks justification. Serdar has no justification from our point of view, we are the creator of the example; but from his point of view he has plenty of justification. It is persuasive enough evidence to hear *sala* at midday to infer that it is Friday. Therefore such a criticism is not plausible.

If one asserts that we must ask straight out, without considering the devious nature of the case: Did Serdar know that it was Friday or not? Of course he did not

know. If he did not know that it was Friday, then one cannot claim that his belief had truth. But this would be equating knowledge with truth, whereas truth is a part of knowledge. We can believe some thing to be true, but it can be unknown to us. We cannot claim that our belief is false because we do not know it. Then, it seems, in this example the Gettier cases are not challengeable.

Robert G. Meyers and Kenneth Stern maintain the problem of the Gettier cases arises from the notion of justification, therefore they suggest another notion of justification. Schematically the argument of Gettier is this: “1) *S* is justified in believing that *p*, 2) *S* believes that *p* and deduces *h* from *p*. 3) Thus *p* justifies *h* for *S*, 4) *p* is false, 5) *h* is true and *S* believes that *h*. 6) Thus, *S* has justified true belief that *h* but *S* does not know that *h*”⁵. According to Meyers and Stern “the attempts that have been made to meet the counter examples of Gettier are all variations on certain epistemic principles. Given that (*p*) justifies (*h*) for (*S*) entails that (*S*) is justified in believing that (*h*), the following principles are involved:

(A) If *S* justified in believing that *p*, then *p*

(B) If *p* justifies *h* for *S*, then *h*

(C) If *S* believes that *p*, *S* is justified in believing that *p*, and correctly infers *h* from *p* either deductively or inductively, then *p* justifies *h* for *S* (whether or not *p* is true).”⁶

Meyers and Stern ignore (A) as being too restrictive and as it eliminates the possibility of justifying non-basic statements inductively. For instance, we have overpowering inductive evidence for *p*, but that *p* is false. If we accept principle (A), it must follow that we are not justified in accepting *p*, despite the fact that our evidence obviously points toward *p*.⁷ Therefore, this principle rules out many cases of knowledge. With respect to Meyers and Stern, the Gettier problem arises from the acceptance of principle (C) that allows for the possibility of a false justification. They claim that in order to resolve the Gettier problem we must alter the notion of justification. According to Meyers and Stern the Gettier examples are established on the rejection of (B) and the acceptance of (C); if we accept principle (B) for justification we can avoid the Gettier cases.⁸ But many objections have been directed and counterexamples have been offered to this principle. These counterexamples, for them, are not really counterexamples to principle (B) for they are based on a misunderstanding about the nature of justification.⁹ They

5 Meyers and Stern, “Knowledge”, p. 147.

6 Meyers and Stern, “Knowledge”, p. 148.

7 Meyers and Stern, “Knowledge”, p. 148.

8 Meyers and Stern, “Knowledge”, p. 149.

9 Meyers and Stern, “Knowledge”, p. 149.

argue that "it is a necessary condition for being justified in believing a nonbasic statement that one's reasons be true. Thus, if S derives h from p where p is false, S is not justified in believing that h , even though he believes that p and is justified in so believing and even though h does indeed follow from p ."¹⁰ In conclusion, according to Meyers and Stern, principle (B) is an adequate account of the justification of non-basic statements, while principle (C) does not give an adequate account of justification, for it leaves the traditional account of knowledge open to the Gettier counterexamples.¹¹ Meyers and Stern give a detailed response to the objections directed to principle (B).

However, J. Gregory Dees and John A. Hart replied to this suggestion and say that principle (B) cannot resolve the Gettier problem, therefore the paradox is regained. "The notion of justification has a history in ethics and jurisprudence as well as in epistemology and a corresponding traditional application. Principle (B) is clearly not in accordance with this tradition. For instance, it would be quite natural to say that pre-Columbian sailors were justified in not sailing too far on the basis of their (false) belief that the world was flat. Ordinarily there seems to be no contradiction, or even any oddity, in the claim that someone had a false belief which justified him in doing or believing something further. But, if principle (B) is accepted, these assertions will have to be discarded as self contradictory."¹² Dees and Hart criticize the suggestion of Meyers and Stern in many respects. Consequently, they "conclude that Meyers and Stern's attempt to rescue the justified true belief analysis of knowledge has failed. Principle (B), with the unconventional notion of justification it contains, is both unhelpful and unacceptable. For it provides an account of knowledge that is both too strong too weak (...) perhaps the addition of a fourth or fifth condition to the justified-true belief analysis may yield positive results, but it appears that attempts to solve the problem merely by reinterpretation of the justification are destined to failure."¹³

The Gettier problem originates from the accident or luck of justification and truth. It appears impossible to find a solution to the Gettier cases from an internalist perspective. One may avoid the Gettier cases by defining knowledge as unaccidentally justified true belief; but this definition would be too restrictive. However, the suggestions of an externalist perspective may be seen to be a response to the Gettier cases.¹⁴

10 Meyers and Stern, "Knowledge", p. 156.

11 Meyers and Stern, "Knowledge", p. 159.

12 J. Gregory Dees and John A. Hart, "Paradox Regained: A Reply to Meyers and Stern", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 71/12 (1974), p. 368.

13 Dees and Hart, "A Reply to Meyers and Stern", p. 372.

14 For example, Nozick suggests four conditions for knowledge. See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1981, chapter 3.

However, we have to designate that classical epistemology does distinguish knowledge from doxa. Accordingly, the knowledge intended by Gettier is not the knowledge intended by the ancient philosophers, but doxa. Knowledge in classical epistemology entails conclusive reasons. For example, the celebrated medieval philosopher, al-Farabi says that “it is obvious that the title knowledge is said about what is necessarily certain rather than about what is uncertain or what is unnecessary although certain.”¹⁵ The definition of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi is: “Knowledge is certain and correspondent belief because of the conclusive reason (*mouciib*) of whether it is necessity or evidence.”¹⁶ In the Gettier cases there is no conclusive reason; indeed, they are full of accidental events. That is, the knowledge of Smith or Serdar in the examples is neither necessary nor certain, and, as can be seen, the understanding of justification is very different from that of contemporary epistemologists. Therefore, the Gettier cases are not counter-examples to the classical definition in this sense. However, we are aware that it is very difficult to arrive at conclusive reasons in every state, and such a notion would be too restrictive.

Özet

Gettier “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge” adlı makalesini yayımlamadan önce bilgi Batı felsefe geleneklerinde yaygın bir şekilde “gerekçelendirilmiş doğru inanç” olarak tanımlanıyordu. Gettier adı geçen makalesinde bir takım örneklerden hareketle gerekçelendirilmiş doğru inancın bilgi için yeterli olmadığını iddia etti. Gettier’in bu iddiası, gerekçelendirilmiş doğru inanç tanımına yöneltilmiş etkili eleştiri kabul edilmiştir. Bununla birlikte birçok bilgi kuramcısı, Gettier’in örneklerinin, gerekçelendirilmiş doğru inanç düşüncesine gerçekte karşıt olmadığını ileri sürmüştür. Bu makale, Gettier’in iddiasının eleştirilebilecek taraflarını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Buna göre Gettier’in iddiası, gerekçelendirme ve doğruluğun yetersiz veya ârızî olduğu durumlara dayanmaktadır. Oysa klasik bilgi teorisi, bilgiyi zandan ayırmıştır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında Gettier’in kullandığı anlamda bilgi, klasik filozofların zan dediği şeydir. Bu nedenle Gettier’in örnekleri gerçekte bilginin klasik tanımını çürüten örnekler değildir. Bununla bir birlikte her durumda kesin deliller bulmak çok zordur ve klasik anlamda bilginin alanı, son derece sınırlıdır.

15 al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Burhān*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1986), p. 25.

16 Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjānī, *Sharh al-Mawāqif fi ‘ilm al-kalām*, Bulaq 1266, p.19.