

Defining Knowledge I: Inference and Defeaters

The Tripartite Definition

- What is Knowledge?
- Most attempts to answer this question offer *definitions*, i.e. a list of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.
- The traditional answer a.k.a. ‘the tripartite definition’ can be traced back to Plato’s dialogues *Meno* and *Theaetetus*.
- X knows that p if and only if:
 - (1) X believes that p
 - (2) p is true
 - (3) X is justified in believing that p
- Why bother with the third condition?

A true belief might be necessary for knowledge, but it is not sufficient. Think of the lottery and stopped clock examples!!

Gettier Counterexamples

- Edmund Gettier (1963) ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’
Gettier’s Counterexamples: Cases of justified true beliefs that do not count as knowledge, i.e. JTB is not sufficient for knowledge.

In one of Gettier’s examples, Smith and Jones applied for the same job. Smith has good evidence that:

- (a) Jones will get the job *and*
- (b) Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Smith argues:

- 1) Jones will get the job
- 2) Jones has ten coins in his pocket

∴ The person who gets the job has ten coins in their pocket.

Gettier Counterexamples (2)

- Here's the twist: Smith gets the job and (unbeknownst to him) he also has ten coins in his pocket.
- *Intuition*: Smith has a justified true belief but no knowledge.
- JTB: YES
 - (a) Smith believes that the person who gets the job has ten coins in their pocket.
 - (b) The proposition 'The person who gets the job has ten coins in their pocket' is true.
 - (c) Smith is justified in believing that the person who gets the job has ten coins in their pocket because he has good evidence.
- Knowledge: NO
 - Smith doesn't really know he has ten coins in his pocket.

Gettier Counterexamples (3)

- You will have noticed that truth and justification (or evidence) are connected in the wrong way.
- ‘Gettier counterexample’ denotes any counterexample that attacks the sufficiency claim of proposed definitions of knowledge.
- Common complaint: Most counterexamples are far-fetched.
Reply: This is inconsequential since we are trying to define knowledge, i.e. give necessary and sufficient conditions that capture all (and only) cases of knowledge.
- Two ways to criticise definitions of knowledge:
 - (a) Show cases of JTB (or *XTB*) that are not knowledge, i.e. JTB is not sufficient for knowledge – Gettier counterexamples.
 - (b) Show cases of knowledge that are not JTB (or *XTB*), i.e. JTB is not necessary for knowledge.

Four Options

- A. Accept the counterexamples, and try to improve the definition.
This is the most popular approach and it typically involves replacing the third condition and/or adding a fourth condition. (NB: This and the next two lectures explore such attempts).
- B. Knowledge cannot be defined.
- (i) Very few concepts can be defined, but that doesn't imply that they're not useful (Fodor, 1998: 45).
 - (ii) We should try to explicate (instead of define) knowledge: Investigate the role the concept of knowledge plays in ordering human life and interactions (Craig, 1990).
 - (iii) Knowledge is a natural phenomenon; we should investigate instances of knowledge empirically, not analytically. (Kornblith, 2002: ch1).

Four Options (2)

C. Knowledge is a useless concept for epistemology.

The right concept to use in epistemology is not knowledge but *justified belief* or *warranted belief* or *reliable belief*, etc. We should aim for theories of these concepts.

D. Reject the counterexamples.

- (i) We can say that those are genuine cases of knowledge because they are cases of justified true belief (or _____ true belief).
- (ii) We can say that those are genuine cases of justified true belief (or _____ true belief) because they are cases of knowledge.

NB: Typically involves either rejecting particular intuitions or undermining intuitions on the whole.

No False Lemmas

- Smith's belief was defective because it came from reasoning that involved a false lemma, viz. that Jones will get the job.
- Suggestion: Add a fourth clause requiring that no false lemmas appear in one's reasoning.
- Thus, X knows that p if and only if:
 - (1) X believes that p
 - (2) p is true
 - (3) X is justified in believing that p
 - and (4) *X's justification involves no inference from false lemmas*
- Prominent advocate: Harman, see 'Selections from *Thought*'

No False Lemmas (2)

- Problem: Sheep-dog example.
 - (a) Looking out into the prairie, I form the image of a sheep in my mind.
 - (b) I believe there is a sheep in the prairie.
 - (c) The proposition ‘There is a sheep in the prairie’ is true.
 - (d) I am justified in believing that there is a sheep in the prairie.
 - (e) My justification does not involve an inference from false lemmas.
- My justification does not involve an *inference* from false lemmas because there is no inference at play here. My belief presumably is formed directly from seeing the cleverly-disguised dog.

Defeaters

- A defeater for a proposition p , is another proposition q such that if q is true and added to our evidence, it undermines our belief in p .
- Simply put: If you believed that q , you would no longer believe that p .
- Defeater conditions put restrictions on the type of justifications that count.
- Sheep-dog example revisited. (defeater: ‘there is a dog in sheep’s clothing in the prairie’)
- Prominent advocate: Klein, see ‘A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge’

Defeaters (2)

- Problem: The defeater condition is too strong!!!
- There are cases of knowledge that are not cases of defeater-justified true belief. In other words, the defeater condition is not necessary.
- Example: Tom and evil twin Buck.
- Do I know that Tom stole the book?
- According to Klein, NO because there is a true defeater, viz. the evidence that Tom's mother gives plus the fact that mothers are generally reliable.
- According to critics of the defeater account, YES because I formed my belief on the basis of reliable evidence. In other words, we have knowledge but we don't have *indefeasibly* justified true belief

Food for Thought

- Are there ways to modify the ‘no false lemmas’ and ‘no true defeater’ accounts so that they resist the aforementioned counterexamples?
- If yes, which one, if any, can resist *any* counterexample we throw at it?

Reading

- E. Gettier ‘Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?’ in Kim and Sosa (eds.) *Epistemology: An Anthology*.
- P. Klein ‘A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge’ in Kim and Sosa.