

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY OF GETTIERED BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I propose a new argument against Gettier's counterexamples to the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief. I claim that if there is no doxastic voluntarism, and if it is admitted that one has formed the belief that p at t_1 if, at t_0 , one would be surprised to learn or discover that $\textit{not-p}$, it can be plausibly argued that Gettiered beliefs simply cannot be formed.

KEYWORDS: belief, evidence, Gettier cases

In "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Edmund Gettier is supposed to have shown that knowledge is not justified true belief.¹ A few philosophers have maintained that our intuition that the beliefs involved in Gettier's counterexamples do not amount to knowledge should be resisted. But most of Gettier's critics have rather argued that these beliefs are not really justified. In other words, it has often been claimed that since his counterexamples are implicitly based on a disputable – if not erroneous – theory of justification, Gettier's conclusion should not have any more authority than any other epistemological views regarding justification and knowledge.

In this paper, I propose a new argument against Gettier's counterexamples. This argument consists neither in showing that the beliefs that he considers to be true and justified actually amount to knowledge, nor in arguing that they are actually unjustified, but instead in arguing that Gettiered beliefs simply cannot be formed. If this argument is correct, the reasoning at work in Gettier cases can be rejected independently of any theory of knowledge and justification.

I

I shall focus in this paper on a classic type of Gettier case,² which does not appear in the 1963 article but which clearly instantiates the fundamental principle upon which all Gettier cases are built.

Let us imagine that I visit a company, and that one of its employees, John, tells me that he owns a Ford. Let us also imagine that I have good reasons to believe him: 1) John shows me with pride his Ford key ring, as well as a car

¹ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123.

² See Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth and Evidence," *Analysis* 25 (1965): 168-75.

registration document which indicates the tax category of the Ford model that he is telling me about; 2) one of his clients telephones him and I hear him ask John whether he is still satisfied with his Ford; 3) several of his long-standing colleagues tell me, whilst John is on the phone, that he is honest and trustworthiness personified. Consequently, I believe that John owns a Ford, from which I then infer that someone in the company owns a Ford.

However, it turns out that 1) John lied to me and does not own a Ford; and that 2) another employee in the company, Martin, with whom I did not speak and of whom I knew nothing, does own one. As a consequence, my belief that John owns a Ford is justified and ipso facto so is my belief that someone in the company owns a Ford. But although the first belief is wrong, the second is true, because someone else in the company, Martin, does own a Ford. This second belief is therefore true and justified but does not constitute knowledge: I do not know that someone in the company owns a Ford.

The idea that, in such a case, I truly (and justifiably) believe that someone in the company owns a Ford is, however, contestable.

Let us begin with a relatively trivial point that, in itself, is not sufficient to refute this idea, but which should not be neglected: The belief I could express in saying that someone in the company owns a Ford could be a belief about John in particular, and not a belief about anyone in the company. It is John and he alone who could be concerned by the vague description "someone in the company." Let us imagine, in order to illustrate this point, that my cousin Hugh has been going out for a while with a beautiful girl and that his young brother Charles has witnessed him adopting, before he goes out to meet her, the typical behaviour of a man in love. Let us then imagine that during a Sunday family lunch, Charles feels like teasing Hugh and says out loud, with a slight smirk on his face: "Someone at this table is in love...." And let us eventually imagine that in fact Hugh is not at all in love with this young girl but that my cousin Brian, also present, secretly is. It is obvious in this case that the belief that Charles expressed in saying "someone at this table is in love..." was about Hugh. Therefore this belief is false and cannot be made true by the fact that Brian is in love with this young girl. Charles would be insincere if he discovered the truth and said something along the lines of: "I was not mistaken as Brian is indeed in love."

Certainly, it will be rightly remarked: "We all agree. The belief that John owns a Ford is false, and it might be that by saying that someone in the company owns a Ford, it is John that is referred to, hence expressing the belief that John owns a Ford. But how is this obvious point relevant to the philosophical analysis of Gettier cases? They are about imagining that one forms not only the belief that

John owns a Ford but, *in addition*, the *different* belief that someone in the company owns a Ford – by drawing the indisputably sound inference that necessarily if John owns a Ford, then someone owns a Ford. The introduction of this second belief makes a crucial difference.”

Indeed, everything depends on this point. Yet, while the debates to which Gettier's article have given rise have been about the epistemological status of this second belief, the question of its possibility has not itself been convincingly challenged. However, it can arguably be claimed that when the belief that John owns a Ford has been formed in the way indicated in the description of the Gettier case, this belief cannot lead one to form, in addition, the different belief that someone in the company owns a Ford.

II

The argument that supports this claim is as follows:

1. One cannot believe at will (Doxastic Involuntarism).
2. (DoxInv) means, more precisely, that, at time t , one cannot believe about the question whether p something *else* than what, at t , the evidence E that one judges to be relative to p being or not the case appears to one to support or establish about the question whether p .
3. It is uncontroversial that (DoxInv) implies that, at t , one cannot believe about the question whether p something *that exceeds or goes beyond* what, at t , E appears to one to support or establish about the question whether p .
4. But why would not (DoxInv) also imply (THESIS) – namely, that, at t , one cannot believe about the question whether p something *weaker*, more indefinite or undetermined, than what, at t , E appears to one to support or establish about the question whether p ?
5. The reason for refusing to draw this inference is the claim that (DoxInv) is to be explained by the fact that belief has a constitutive epistemic aim or norm, be it truth, knowledge, or justification: one cannot believe about the question whether p something *that exceeds* what E appears to support or establish, because in such a case one would judge oneself to believe in an unreliable or unjustified way – which is impossible if belief has truth, knowledge, or justification as constitutive aims or norms. However, it is perfectly possible to believe something *weaker* than what E

appears to support or establish, since this is a good way to satisfy these aims or norms.

6. However, even if it is admitted that there are such epistemic aims or norms of belief involved in the process of belief formation, and that they control or regulate this process – which is far from being indisputable – it does not ensue that the only way evidence constrains belief is *through* such aims or norms, and that evidence has *in itself* no power to determine what one believes.
7. On the contrary, it seems plausible to claim that evidence directly constrains belief – more specifically, that one's beliefs formed at t directly inherit their content from the evidence one judges at t to have for them. It even seems that this *has to be so*, because if evidence constrained one's beliefs only through such epistemic aims or norms, one would always believe something as weak as possible on the basis of the evidence one has, in order to satisfy these aims or norms – which is clearly not the case.
8. But if one's beliefs formed at t directly inherit their content from the evidence one judges at t to have for them, we do not have any reason to deny that (DoxInv) implies (THESIS). In other words, if we judge (7) to be plausible, it would be arbitrary to reject (THESIS).

More positively at present:

9. If it is admitted – rather uncontroversially – that one has formed the belief that p at $t-1$ if, at $t0$, one would be surprised to learn or discover that *not-p*, then the supporter of the thesis that it is possible, in the Gettier case in question, to form the belief that someone in the company owns a Ford in addition to the belief that John owns a Ford also has to support the following claim: if one were to learn that John does not own a Ford after a) having formed the belief that John owns a Ford (and, moreover, formed the belief that nobody else in the company owns Fords), and b) having explicitly admitted that if John owns a Ford then someone in the company owns a Ford, then one would be *doubly* surprised: added to the surprise that John does not own a Ford, one would undergo an *additional* surprise – namely, the surprise that nobody in the company owns a Ford.
10. But this claim looks extremely implausible.

11. Now, the simplest way to account for the fact that, in this situation, one would not be doubly surprised is to hold that one has not formed two distinct beliefs when one has formed the belief that John owns a Ford and admitted that if John owns a Ford then someone in the company owns a Ford.
12. Therefore, we should not consider obvious (far from it, given the implausibility of its “double surprise” consequence) what Gettier takes for granted – namely, the idea that, in this situation, one has formed the true belief that someone in the company owns a Ford in addition to the false belief that John owns a Ford.
13. Since (THESIS) can explain why, in this situation, one would not have formed the true belief that someone in the company owns a Ford in addition to the false belief that John owns a Ford, (THESIS) should be considered as plausible at least. This does not mean that (THESIS) does not need additional defence and argument, but it does mean that its being highly unorthodox should not lead one to claim that it should simply be dismissed as long as it is not accompanied by an extensive discussion of the nature of belief and evidence, the functional role belief plays, or, for instance, its relation to belief-ascriptions.

In order to clarify the meaning of (THESIS) and to show that it is not as counterintuitive as it might seem at first sight, I shall answer two objections that it is quite natural to raise against it.

The first is as follows: if someone comes into John’s office (after he told me that he owns a Ford and I have formed the belief that he owns one) and asks: “Who here believes that someone in this company owns a Ford?,” should I raise my hand or not? (THESIS) seems to imply that I should not, on the ground that I believe that *John* owns a Ford. But this is clearly untenable. In the same way, if, during a trial, the judge asks me whether I believe that somebody lives on the upper floor of the building that I inhabit, and that I answer “no” because my evidence supports something more precise – namely, that Mary and Isaac live there – I will be *rightfully* convicted of perjury. But does (THESIS) not entail that there is no perjury in such a case?

The way the supporter of (THESIS) can reject this objection is rather simple: I should answer “yes” to the judge who asks me: “Do you believe that somebody lives on the upper floor of the building in which you live?” and I should raise my hand when I am asked: “Who here believes that someone in this

company owns a Ford?” But I should not do so because I entertain two other beliefs in addition to the beliefs that John owns a Ford and that Mary and Isaac live on the upper floor of the building – namely, the belief that someone owns a Ford, and the belief that someone lives there. I have to answer “yes” to the judge simply because “... that somebody lives on the upper floor of the building” constitutes a *true characterization of what I believe*. It is more vague, less precise, than “... that Mary and Isaac live on the upper floor of the building,” but it is nonetheless true. If the judge furthermore asks: “Do you believe that *Mary and Isaac* live on the upper floor of the building?” I could answer something like: “yes, *exactly*,” since this is a much better description of what I believe than “...that somebody lives on the upper floor of the building.” But this does not mean that “...that somebody lives on the upper floor of the building” is any less true. This is the reason why I would have been *rightfully* convicted of perjury if I had answered “no” to the judge.

The second objection is as follows: if (THESIS) were true, one could not even believe that John owns a Ford. If one cannot believe less than what the evidence appears to support, the only thing one can believe about John is that John, who has a Ford key ring, who is sat at this desk, who wears a blue polo shirt, who is a human being, who lives on earth, etc., owns a Ford. In other words, if (THESIS) were true, the only belief one could have about John would be a gigantic and almost infinite belief encompassing everything that appears to one to be the case about John. As a result, it would be false to say that one can entertain different beliefs about John – for instance, that he owns a Ford, and that he wears a blue polo shirt. But this is definitely unacceptable. Therefore (THESIS) is false.

However, (THESIS) is not committed to such an absurdity. The thesis that, at t , one cannot believe about the question whether p something *weaker* than what, at t , E appears to one to support about this question is to be understood as follows: when, *and only when*, the *only* evidence one has in favour of something weaker than p – namely, p^* – is the evidence one has in favour of p and that led one to believe that p , we cannot be in presence of two different beliefs – the belief that p and the belief that p^* – but only in presence of one single belief, the belief that p .

More specifically, if it turns out that one admits or realizes that it follows from p that p^* , one then not only believes that p but also believes that it is veridical (but incomplete) to describe the fact that p by saying that p^* . However, one does not thereby believe that p^* in addition to believing that p .

It ensues that since the evidence one has in favour of John owning a Ford is not, for instance, the evidence one has in favour of John wearing a blue polo short, (THESIS) does not entail in any way that one cannot entertain two different beliefs about John – that he owns a Ford, and that he wears a blue polo shirt. What (THESIS) actually involves is that to believe that *someone* owns a Ford the kind of evidence that is needed is evidence that does not establish that someone owns a Ford *only by establishing that such and such an individual owns one* – which is not the case in the Gettier case under discussion.

If however I had noticed, upon arriving at the company, a Ford parked in the employee parking lot (to which the access is strictly controlled), I would have had evidence that someone in the company owns a Ford, and it would have led me to believe this was the case – or to go on believing so, even after having talked to John and formed the *different* belief that *he* owns a Ford. This is because this perceptual evidence does not support the claim that someone in the company owns a Ford *only by supporting the stronger claim that such and such an individual in particular owns one*.

In order to summarize the aspects of (THESIS) that have just been stressed, let us consider another situation: Let us imagine that I tragically see, as I go in to his office, my friend George being murdered by my other friend Peter. In such a situation, according to (THESIS), I cannot form the belief that someone murdered George *in addition to* the belief that Peter murdered George, because the evidence I have appears to me to establish that someone murdered George only by establishing that he was murdered by Peter. When I believe, on such an evidential basis, that Peter murdered George, what it is possible for me to believe in addition is, for instance, that the statement that someone murdered George veridically (but partially) describes what happened. But this does not imply in any way that I have thereby formed in addition the belief that someone murdered George. Believing that this is a true description of what happened would imply believing that someone murdered George only if it were true that, to every way in which one can express or describe one's belief that *p*, corresponds a belief that *adds* to this belief that *p* – which does not have the slightest plausibility. In the same way, if I am very pleased by the good news I received from my old friend Duncan, my feeling can be correctly described by saying that I am very pleased by something, and I can perfectly consider that it is a true description of what I feel. But this does not prove in any way that there is an additional feeling that explains the truth of this description: the feeling of being very pleased by something.

III

It might also be objected to (THESIS) that if one believes that the statement that someone owns a Ford is true, it ensues that one believes that someone owns a Ford. But this objection rests upon a confusion that can be easily dissipated: To believe that p is not to believe that the sentence or statement “ p ” is true. One can for instance believe that “ p ” is true even though one does not at all understand the meaning of “ p ,” but one cannot believe that p in such a case.

Let us imagine for example that my knowledge of physics is virtually inexistent and that, as I enter the class given by the Nobel Prize Laureate in Physics David Wineland, I hear him state, having no idea what he is talking about: “I remind you this: The spin quantum number of the fermions is a half-integer.” Let us also imagine that I know that David Wineland is extremely reliable when it comes to the notions he teaches in his lessons. Therefore, I believe (and, arguably, know) that the following sentence is true: “The spin quantum number of the fermions is a half-integer.” Nevertheless, can I believe (or know) that the spin quantum number of the fermions is a half-integer? Let us imagine this time that David Wineland, in a whimsical moment, does not state this in English but in a language that I do not understand in the slightest – Icelandic for example (“I remind you this: [statement in Icelandic]”). In this case, it would be obviously absurd to maintain that after having heard David Wineland, I believe (or know) that the spin quantum number of the fermions is a half-integer. Now, there is no reason to suppose that things should be different when the statement is made in English and I have no idea what he is talking about; being able to grasp the grammatical structure of the English sentence but not of the Icelandic sentence is not enough to make a difference on this point. Therefore, I can actually believe that I am saying something true by repeating the English or the Icelandic sentence, and memorise the English or the Icelandic sentence for this reason, without however being in a position to believe what the latter states. In brief, I can believe that “ p ” is true without being in a position to believe that p .

Therefore, to return to the Ford case, it is perfectly possible to believe that the sentence “someone in the company owns a Ford” is true, and to believe that this follows from the fact that John owns a Ford, but not to have the additional belief that someone owns a Ford. To put it another way, if, after having listened to John, someone were to ask me what I believe, and that I answered: “Well, I believe that *John* owns a Ford ... and therefore that *someone* owns a Ford,” the only additional belief that I express after my moment of reflection is that what I believe – that John owns a Ford – can be correctly (but partially) described in this way; something I had not explicitly thought of before this moment.

IV

If (THESIS) is true, it does not follow at all that it cannot be shown that justified true belief is not knowledge, only that this cannot be done by creating cases on the basis of the principle that might be labelled the *principle of weakening, by undefinition, of a false and justified belief*.³ Amongst the cases that are often categorised as Gettier cases, only those that are not based on such a principle can achieve this – such as, for instance, the Barn façades case or the Dictator’s death case (in which an “environmental epistemic luck” intervenes that excludes knowledge).⁴ However, as revealed by the diversity of intuitions epistemologists have about these cases, they do not seem to be able to *prove* the epistemological conclusion that “genuine” Gettier cases, based on the principle of a weakening of a false and justified belief, seemed to be able to prove.

Does this mean that there is no hope for showing indisputably that a belief may be true and justified and yet not constitute knowledge, without resorting to the principle of undefinition of a false belief? Certainly not. The belief in question in Russell’s (seemingly epistemologically neutral) case of the stopped clock, for

³ I note in passing that the following case is not based on such a principle, and so it is perfectly compatible with (THESIS): I can believe that John owns a Ford, later forget which employee in the company owns a Ford, and so believe only that someone in the company owns a Ford. If it turns out that John lied to me and does not own a Ford, but that another employee does own one, the resulting belief that someone in the company owns a Ford is, arguably, a justified true belief that is not knowledge. In this case, I am not supposed to have a belief that is weaker than the belief that I take the evidence to support and that would be based on that evidence only.

I also note that it could be argued, about the case that has just been described, that the belief that someone in the company owns a Ford is, in actual fact, simply false, because it is about the particular employee to which I talked but that I would not be able to identify anymore and whose name I do not remember – namely John. And John does not own a Ford.

⁴ The first case, imagined by Carl Ginet (and reported in Alvin Goldman, “Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge,” *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 771–791), goes as follows: Barney is driving, unbeknownst to him, in a county peppered with barn-façades. He decides to walk a few steps, so stops his car in front of the only real barn in the county, and believes that there is a barn in front of him. Even if true and justified, this belief does not seem to amount to knowledge. The second case, imagined by Gilbert Harman, goes as follows, in Robert Nozick’s words: “The dictator of a country is killed; in their first edition, newspapers print the story, but later all the country’s newspapers and other media deny the story, falsely. Everyone who encounters the denial believes it (or does not know what to believe and so suspends judgment). Only one person in the country fails to hear any denial and he continues to believe the truth. [...] We are reluctant to say he knows the truth. The reason is that if he had heard the denials, he too would have believed them, just like everyone else.” (In Robert Nozick, *Philosophical explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 177)

example, clearly appears to be an instance of justified true belief that is not knowledge. For the record, this case is as follows: the clock in S's living room stopped, unbeknownst to S, at 10.30 PM, while she was asleep. The next morning, S enters the living room at 10.30 AM to check the time. She has no reason to believe that the clock has stopped, and consequently believes that it is 10:30 AM. S, in this situation, does not know that it is 10:30 AM, but truly and justifiably believes it.

One question that probably deserves to be raised in conclusion is whether there is, after all, any good reason for classifying such a justified true belief – or those in question in the Barn façades case or the case of the Dictator's death, for instance – as “Gettiered.” Indeed, it could be argued that this is nothing more than a rather unhelpful verbal stipulation, devoid of all epistemological *raison d'être*, if, as it appears, explanations of the absence of knowledge in these cases have almost nothing in common – and, above all, nothing in common with the reason for there being no knowledge in the classic Ford case that we considered above. If, for the purpose of epistemological clarity, it was specified that in order to be considered Gettiered, a justified true belief must result from the use of the principle of weakening of a justified false belief, it could be claimed – if (THESIS) is correct – that there are no Gettiered beliefs. And this would not mean in any way that there cannot be justified true beliefs that do not amount to knowledge.