

GETTIERED BELIEFS ARE GENUINE BELIEFS: A REPLY TO GAULTIER AND BIRO

Gábor FORRAI

ABSTRACT. In recent articles in this journal Benoit Gaultier and John Biro have argued that the original Gettier cases and the ones closely modelled on them fail, and the reason for the failure is that the subject in these cases does not actually have the belief that would serve as a counterexample to the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge. They claim that if our evidence pertains to a particular individual (as in the first case) or to the truth of one of the disjuncts (as in the second case), we do not genuinely believe the existential generalization or the disjunction which logically follows. I will challenge their arguments and suggest that our unwillingness to assert the existential generalization or the disjunction under these conditions does not stem from lack of belief but from pragmatic principles.

KEYWORDS: belief, Benoit Gaultier, Gettier cases, Paul Grice, Horn scales, John Biro

In recent articles in this journal Benoit Gaultier¹ and John Biro² propose a new way of doing away with Gettier's original counterexamples to the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge and the counterexamples closely modelled on them, like Lehrer's Nogot/Havit case.³ In these counterexamples the subject has a justified belief, from which he infers by existential generalization or by addition to another proposition and comes to believe it. It is stipulated that the belief he starts out from is false, but the belief he arrives at by inference happens to be true. Gettier claims that the belief the subject arrives at – which, following Gaultier, I will call Gettiered belief – satisfies the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge but does not constitute knowledge.⁴

Gaultier and Biro respond by denying that the Gettiered belief is a genuine belief. Gaultier says that attributing the subject a Gettiered belief is just a vague

¹ Benoit Gaultier, "An Argument Against the Possibility of Gettiered Beliefs," *Logos & Episteme* V, 3 (2014): 265-272. Hereafter: Gaultier.

² John Biro, "Non-Pickwickian Belief and 'the Gettier Problem'," *Logos & Episteme* VIII, 3 (2017): 47-69. Hereafter: Biro.

³ Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth and Evidence," *Analysis* 25 (1965): 168-75.

⁴ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123.

and imprecise characterization of what he believes;⁵ Biro says that it is a belief only in a pickwickian sense rather than a serious belief.⁶ Even though they argue differently,⁷ their diagnosis of what goes wrong is the same: if one has evidence only for a singular proposition or one of the disjuncts, and has *no independent evidence* for the existential generalization or the inclusive disjunction which follows from it, one cannot form a genuine belief in the existential generalization or the inclusive disjunction.

Gaultier articulates this point by putting forward a general claim called (THESIS), which he explains 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 .⁸

Since the existential generalization/disjunction is weaker than the singular proposition/one of the disjuncts, if we only have evidence for the latter but possess no independent evidence for the former, (THESIS) entails that we do not believe the former.

Biro develops the same point by assuming “that believing something in a non-pickwickian sense means being prepared to assert it seriously,”⁹ and then proposing conditions under which existential generalization and disjunction can be seriously asserted.¹⁰ The condition for the serious assertion of an existential generalization is that we should be also prepared to assert that if one particular individual does not have the property in question, another individual does.¹¹ In case of the disjunction the condition is that we should be also prepared to assert that if one of the disjuncts is false, the other one is true.¹² As these conditions are not satisfied if we only have evidence about a particular individual or the truth of one of the disjuncts, they, in effect, require possession of independent evidence for the existential generalization or the disjunction.

⁵ Gaultier, 270.

⁶ Biro, 53, 67.

⁷ Biro does not approve of Gaultier’s solution, even though he thinks it is on the right track, 67-68.

⁸ Gaultier, 270.

⁹ Biro, 53.

¹⁰ I do not discuss Biro’s special objection to Gettier’s original first example on p. 52, because it does not generalize to all examples using existential generalization, like the Nogot/Havit case.

¹¹ Biro, 56.

¹² Biro, 54.

Let us now see how this idea can be used to refute the Nogot/Havit counterexample, which Gaultier and Biro both analyze. Suppose I have excellent evidence to believe that Nogot, who is in my office, owns a Ford: I saw him getting out of a Ford, he told me he had just purchased it, showed me the certificate, and I also know him to be honest and reliable. From my belief it follows by existential generalization that someone in my office owns a Ford; that is the Gettiered belief. Now suppose that Nogot lied, the certificate is forged, the car he got out of is not his own, and also suppose that someone else in my office, Havit, does happen to own a Ford. The Gettiered belief would then be both justified and true and thus a counterexample to the justified-true-belief account of knowledge. However, in this situation the only evidence we have is what supports that Nogot owns a Ford, and we have *no independent evidence* suggesting that someone in my office owns a Ford. (Such evidence could consist, for instance, in regularly seeing a Ford in the parking lot reserved for those working in the office.) If genuine belief in the existential generalization requires independent evidence, it follows that the Gettiered belief is not a genuine belief.

Gaultier and Biro lay out this point as follows. Gaultier says that since the only evidence I have in favor of the weaker proposition “Someone in my office owns a Ford” is the evidence I have in favor of the stronger proposition “Nogot, who is in my office, owns a Ford,” I cannot have two beliefs, and I believe only the stronger proposition. Biro says that in these circumstances I would not be prepared to assert “If Nogot does not own a Ford, someone else in the office does,” and since being prepared to assert that is required for the serious assertion of “Someone in my office owns a Ford,” I cannot seriously assert the latter. What we are not willing to assert seriously we do not genuinely believe, therefore, I do not genuinely believe that someone in my office owns a Ford.

Let us now see how they argue for this kind of solution. Gaultier first offers a general argument for his (THESIS):

...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 [truth, knowledge, or justification], 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.¹³

I do not find this convincing. First, I am not sure what to make of the claim that one’s beliefs directly inherit their content from what one takes to be the

¹³ Gaultier, 268.

evidence one for them. Suppose one police officer believes someone to be the murderer because he found the blood of the victim on his clothes and his fingerprints on the murder weapon and another police officer believes the same person to be the murderer based on eyewitness report. Would their beliefs have different content? Or suppose my neighbor asks me to look after his cat while he is away and says he would compensate me for taking the trouble, and I come to believe through wishful thinking that by ‘compensation’ he meant a huge amount of money. What do I take to be the evidence for my belief and how does it constrain the content of my belief?

Second, it seems wrong that pursuing such epistemic aims such as truth, knowledge and justification¹⁴ would make us adopt the weakest possible beliefs the evidence allows. We are not concerned here with cases in which we lack sufficient evidence, but with cases in which the evidence supports both a stronger claim and weaker claim – e.g. “Nogot, who is in my office, owns a Ford” and “Someone in my office owns a Ford.” If we come to believe the weaker claims only, we end up believing fewer truths, having less knowledge and having fewer justified beliefs. It is not the pursuit of truth, knowledge or justification that may keep us from accepting the stronger claim, but the aim of avoiding falsehood: by believing the stronger claims as well we run a greater risk of having false beliefs. However, even if avoidance of falsehood is one of our epistemic aims, the pursuit of truth, knowledge and justification still advises us to accept the risk. So we do not need Gaultier’s (THESIS) to prompt us to accept the stronger but justified claims.

Gaultier offers a second reason as well.¹⁵ Let us take the Nogot scenario without Havit, i.e. let us suppose that no one in my office owns a Ford. If it turns out that the evidence is misleading, I will be surprised to learn that Nogot does not own a Ford, but, as Gaultier correctly observes, I would not feel surprised once again if I also learned that no one in my office does. Gaultier suggests that the simplest explanation of why I would not be doubly surprised is that I did not have the Gettiered belief that someone in my office owns a Ford.

There is, however, another explanation which is just as simple and goes like this. When a belief is justified by a single inference, and one of the premises proves false, we give up the belief. If we are informed later that what we used to believe on the basis of the inference is false, we cannot be surprised, because we no longer believe that. Here is an example. I know that a car-loving colleague has recently bought a Porsche and is quite crazy about it. One day I drive by his house and see a Porsche just like his, which is badly smashed. Arriving at work next morning I do

¹⁴ Gaultier, 267.

¹⁵ Gaultier, 268-9.

not see the Porsche in the parking lot, and when I enter the office, I hear the colleague talking on the phone about a car insurance claim. As a result, I come to believe that his Porsche got crashed. Knowing his temperament and how much he adored his car, I infer that he must be pretty upset. I ask another colleague, who tells me that the reason the Porsche is not in the parking lot and the owner is having a conversation about an insurance claim is that his wife's car got crashed, and he had to lend the Porsche to her. Hearing this, I will no longer believe that the Porsche owner is upset, so I will not be surprised when I find out that he is not. This explanation applies to the Nogot scenario as well, in which the Gettiered belief is also based on a single inference the premise of which turns out false. This renders Gaultier's explanation superfluous: we can explain the lack of double surprise by saying that the inferentially justified belief is abandoned when the premise proves false, hence we do not have to suppose the subject never had that belief.

Biro does not provide a general argument either for his view that genuine belief is marked by serious assertion or that the conditions for serious assertion of existential generalization and disjunction are the ones he suggests, but he offers two parallel arguments. The first is this:

Suppose Poirot says "someone in this room is the murderer" because he believes that the nephew killed the uncle. On subsequently discovering that the nephew has a cast-iron alibi and it was the butler, also present, who committed the dastardly deed, we would not allow Poirot to get away with saying (not that he would), "I was right all along!"¹⁶

This is clearly right, and it indeed attests to Biro's solution supposing the reason we find Poirot's reaction disingenuous is that he did not really believe "someone in this room is the murderer" but believed only that "the nephew in the room is the murderer." But there is another, more general explanation of why we do not allow Poirot to take credit for his true belief: we do not allow people to take credit for true beliefs if they are based on wrong reasons. To see this, let me revert to the case of the Porsche lover. Suppose that the Porsche lover finishes the telephone conversation about the insurance claim and is pretty upset, because the insurance company would not pay for the damage to his wife's car. I cannot turn to the colleague who told me that there is nothing wrong with the Porsche and say "See, I was right all along: he *is* upset," because my belief that the Porsche lover is upset was based on the false reason that his Porsche had been crashed.

The second parallel argument is this:

¹⁶ Biro, 67. Gaultier also gestures toward an argument like this, 266.

A mark of seriousness in a belief is that it guides action. If I am in the market for a used Ford and believe that Havit owns the one in the parking lot, it would not be rational for me to go around asking who owns it, as it would be if what I seriously believed was that someone or other in the building did.¹⁷

Believing that “Someone or other in the building owns the Ford” amounts believing “Someone in the building owns the Ford” and not believing anything concerning who that person might be, and under these conditions it makes sense to ask who owns it. But the reason why we do not ask this when we believe that the Ford belongs to Havit is not that we do not believe that someone in the building owns a Ford but that we *also* believe that Havit owns it. Actions are guided by constellations of beliefs and not a single belief.¹⁸ Here is an example. Suppose I want to buy a used Ford and believe Havit’s Ford is up for sale. It would then be perfectly rational to talk to him about buying it. However, if I *also* believe that Havit would not sell me his car for twice the market price because he hates my guts, I will not talk to him. The reason I do not talk him is not that I do not seriously believe that his car is up for sale but that I also believe something else.

As a final note let me indicate what the correct observation is that underlies Biro’s solution and possibly also Gaultier’s: we normally *assert* the existential generalization – the weaker claim as Gaultier would put it – if and only if the evidence available supports the existential generalization but does not support any particular singular proposition implying it, i.e. if only if we have *independent evidence* for the existential generalization *but nothing else*. If, on the other hand, we have evidence that a certain individual has the property in question, it is the singular proposition we will assert. So if the only evidence suggesting that someone in my office owns a Ford is that we regularly see a Ford in the parking lot reserved for those working in the office, we will assert the existential generalization. However, if the evidence suggests that a particular person in the office owns a Ford, we will assert the singular proposition instead. The same consideration applies *mutatis mutandis* to disjunction: we will normally assert it if and only if our evidence supports the disjunction but does not support either of the disjuncts; if the evidence supports one of the disjuncts, it is that disjunct we will assert. From our unwillingness to assert the existential generalization/disjunction when and only when we only have evidence pertaining to a particular individual/one of the disjuncts Biro – and possibly also Gaultier – infers that we do not genuinely believe the existential generalization/disjunction under these conditions. But that is

¹⁷ Biro, 68.

¹⁸ Even if in explaining actions we only mention the most salient belief, because we trust that the audience can figure out the rest.

wrong: our willingness is explained by pragmatic considerations rather than lack of belief.

This kind of phenomenon was first noted by Grice, in whose example A and B are discussing whether to visit C while in France. If A asks “Where does C live?” and B responds “Somewhere in the South of France,” this implicates that B cannot specify exactly where; the reason why B violates the maxim that one should provide as much information as needed is that he cannot do so.¹⁹ This observation spawned a special field of research in pragmatics which is called *scalar implicatures*. The name comes from the classic treatment by Laurence Horn, which relied on what are now called Horn scales.²⁰ Horn scales are groups of expressions arranged in order of decreasing informativity, like:

<all, most, many, some, few >

<excellent, good >

<hot, warm>

<always, often, sometimes>

<and, or>²¹

Horn regards it a general rule (subject to exceptions in special contexts) that employing a weaker term implicates that the speaker does not believe that using the more informative term is correct. Thus saying “I have read some of the papers” implicates that I have not read all of them. Saying this when I have read all of the papers would be pragmatically inappropriate, because it would violate the pragmatic principle “Say as much as you can” and would give rise to the false implication that I have not read all of them.

Taking our cue from pragmatics, the reason why we do not assert the existential generalization/disjunction when we possess evidence about a particular individual having the property in question/the truth of one of disjuncts is that pragmatic principles demand us to provide as much information as we can. So the reason why we do not assert the weaker claim is not that we do not believe it but that it would be pragmatically inappropriate to do so: we would thereby violate the

¹⁹ Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 32-33.

²⁰ Laurence R. Horn, *On the Semantic Properties of Logical Operators in English* (Ph.D. thesis, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1972). For a critical exposition and more current literature see: Bart Geurts, *Quantity Implicatures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 50-66.

²¹ The examples are taken from Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 134.

pragmatic principle and generate false implications.²² “Someone in my office owns a Ford” is indeed be a strange thing to say if I believe that it is Nogot, but it is not a strange thing to believe.

²² This consideration also reveals what underlies Biro’s argument for his claim that disjunction as applied to serious belief is always exclusive: when we believe both disjuncts, we should use “and,” 54. “And” and “or” also constitute a Horn scale. If we say “or” this implicates that we do not believe “and,” which makes the disjunction exclusive. Laurence R. Horn, “Implicature” in the *Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds. Laurence S. Horn and Gregory Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 9.