

REPLY TO FORRAI: NO REPRIEVE FOR GETTIER "BELIEFS"

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ABSTRACT: In a recent paper in this journal, Gabor Forrai offers ways to resist my argument that in so-called Gettier cases the belief condition is not, as is commonly assumed, satisfied. He argues that I am mistaken in taking someone's reluctance to assert a proposition he knows follows from a justified belief on finding the latter false as evidence that he does not believe it, as such reluctance may be explained in other ways. While this may be true, I show that it does not affect my central claim which does not turn on considerations special to assertion.

KEYWORDS: Gettier, belief, assertion, inference

In a recent paper in this journal, Gabor Forrai¹ offers ways to resist my claim² that in so-called Gettier cases the belief condition is not, as is commonly assumed, satisfied. My reason for rejecting the common assumption was that the belief the subject in those cases is supposed to have and which happens, fortuitously, to be true is a belief in a merely pickwickian sense. I contrasted such "beliefs" with what I called serious beliefs, those one is prepared to own and on the basis of which one is prepared to act. I argued that having a merely pickwickian belief is not enough for one to satisfy the belief condition of the justified-true-belief account of knowledge and that therefore that account is left untouched by the supposed Gettier-style counterexamples. Thus in the first Gettier case, involving existential generalization, while Smith believes that someone, namely Jones, has ten coins in his pocket, he only "believes" that someone *or other* has ten coins in his pocket, which is the proposition made true by *his* happening to have ten coins in his pocket. This is shown by the fact that he is not prepared to assert that if Jones does not, someone else does. In the second case, Smith does not seriously believe the disjunctions he is said to have "constructed" (Gettier's word), one of which is made true by the second disjunct's happening to be true, since he is not prepared to say that if the first disjunct is false, the second must be true.

¹ Gabor Forrai, "Gettiered Beliefs Are Genuine Beliefs: A Reply to Gaultier and Biro," *Logos & Episteme* X, 2 (2019): 217-224

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

Forrai challenges this line of argument in two ways. First, he claims that someone's unwillingness to assert something may be explained in ways other than by denying that he believes it. He describes a number of such ways, but I shall not take these up in detail, as I think that even if he is right, the fact that there are other explanations of the unwillingness to assert does not show that there is no conceptual connection between serious belief and assertion of the sort I posited. Take Forrai's twist on the well-known Havit/Nogot case:

Suppose I want to buy a used Ford and believe that 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 to him is not that I do not seriously believe that his car is up for sale but that I also believe something else.

All this shows, though, is that, unsurprisingly, the connection holds only *ceteris paribus*. What Forrai's example brings out is that in a particular instance someone who would normally be prepared to assert something may have reason not to assert it. He is right that for this reason his not asserting it is not sufficient evidence that he does not believe it. But the point of insisting on the link between serious belief and willingness to assert was not epistemological.

Forrai says that "[b]elieving that 'Someone or other in the building owns the Ford' amounts [to] believing that 'Someone in the building owns the Ford' and not believing anything concerning who that person might be..." I agree. The question is, can one believe *this* if one believes that someone, namely, Nogot owns a Ford? It is to this question to which I urged a negative answer. Forrai's formulation in fact makes vivid that that must be the right answer: it cannot be the case both that I believe and do not believe something concerning who the owner is.

Others have also wondered about whether tying the seriousness of one's belief to what one is prepared to assert, as I did, is as illuminating as I claimed. Consider lies. Suppose little Timmy says he did not break the window, even though he did. Little Timmy does not seriously believe he did not break the window (he knows he did!), but he is willing to assert that he did not do it. Or, while each gladiator is willing to claim to be Spartacus in order to protect his leader, obviously, none of them seriously believes that he is Spartacus.

However, I offered being prepared to assert as a necessary condition on seriousness of belief, not as a sufficient one. Indeed, Timmy's willingness to deny breaking the window does not show that he believes that he did not, nor does a gladiator's willingness to claim to be Spartacus show that he believes that he is Spartacus. I claimed only that it is a mistake to think that Timmy believes that he

did not break the window if he is *not* prepared (*ceteris paribus*) to say that he did not; similarly, it would be a mistake to think that a gladiator believed that he was Spartacus if he were not prepared (*ceteris paribus*) to say that he was. The fact that a *ceteris paribus* clause is needed does not affect the point. *Of course*, one can have reason not to be prepared to assert something one believes (or not to be prepared to act in a certain way). The conceptual connection I have suggested holds between serious belief and preparedness to assert or to act is not thereby compromised.

It is important to emphasize, though, that the main argument against counting Gettier "beliefs" as serious does not rest solely, or even primarily, on considerations having to do with assertion. In fact such considerations are not essential to the argument, as Forrai seems to assume. That this is so can be shown by examples that do not involve assertion at all.

Having just seen our neighbour enter his house, I believe that he is in the house, and, of course, that there is *someone* in the house; I will bet you that there is if you claim otherwise. But I do not believe that there is *someone or other* in the house – let us go and see if it is our neighbour! Of course, even having seen him enter, I could have reason to believe that there is no-one in the house – say, hearing the motorcycle he keeps by the back door start up, its sound gradually fading. Now imagine that my neighbour did leave by the back door, but quietly, on foot. However, he did not lock the door, and a burglar has snuck in. The reason why this is not a Gettier case is that believing that there is someone, namely, my neighbour, in the house is incompatible with believing (though not, of course, with "believing") that there is someone or other in the house, the first proposition's entailing the second and my knowing that it does notwithstanding. If serious, the two beliefs would be based on different evidence and would prompt different actions. Seeing my neighbour enter his house is one thing, seeing the light go on in the living room is another: the former may prompt me to walk over to ask how he enjoyed his trip, the latter, to call the police if I believe him to be still away. That I do not do both shows that I do not believe both that my neighbour is in the house and that someone or other is in the house. (If so, the fact that it is true that there is someone – the burglar – in the house does not show that I have a justified true belief but no knowledge.)

While such cases show that the argument does not turn on considerations special to assertion, they do allow for a gap, similar to that between being prepared to assert and actually asserting, between being prepared to act in a certain way and in fact acting in that way. While actions may speak louder than words, they, too, are not an infallible guide to serious belief. Thus positing a link between action and belief is subject to a *ceteris paribus* clause no less than the link between assertion

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and belief. But these cases do show that the Gricean considerations Forrai appeals to do not go to the heart of the matter.

In fact, the main point does not turn even on the link between serious belief and action. There is a simple and direct way to make it. Take, again, Gettier's first case, and ask, would Smith believe that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket if he did not believe that Jones will and does? Or would Smith believe that someone in the office owns a Ford if he did not believe that Nogot does? If the answer is, no – as it surely is – does that not show that he does not believe what turns out to be true, namely, that someone else – Smith himself – has ten coins in his pocket or that someone else – Havit – owns a Ford? In the same way, ask if in Gettier's second case I would believe the disjunction that turns out to be true if I did not believe the first disjunct. If the answer is, no – as it surely is – does that not show that even though believing the first disjunct is sufficient for "believing" the disjunction (that is, recognizing that it is entailed by the first disjunct), it is not sufficient for believing it.

But wait! If you are right, we never come to seriously believe something by inferring it from something we believe? A fine pickle! But that is, of course, not what I am suggesting. The inferences in the Gettier examples each have special features that set them apart from the normal case. In the first, Smith's inference needs to be from his belief about Jones to a belief about *someone or other*, *I have no idea who*, if Smith is to have a belief his getting the job and having ten coins in his pocket can make true. But that belief is incompatible with the belief from which it is supposed to be inferred. I can have it only by ceasing to believe that *Jones* has ten coins in his pocket. In the second example, while the disjunctions supposedly inferred ("constructed," as Gettier tellingly puts it) are made true by the truth of the second disjunct, to believe them seriously requires believing that if the first disjunct is false, the second must be true. Inferring the disjunctions by addition gives one no reason at all to think this.

I close by offering a definition of what I have called serious, non-pickwickian belief:

For any set of propositions such that one knows that one of them follows from the others but could be true even if those others were not, one believes the entailed proposition if and only if one would believe it even if one did not believe (all) the entailing ones.

This makes room for the idea that one can recognize that it follows from *Fa* that $E(x) Fx$ without believing the latter as usually understood, viz., as containing no information about what instantiates *x*. But such recognition is not enough for one to believe the existential generalization so understood, if what one believes is

only *Fa*. Believing *Fa* is tantamount to believing that something, *namely a*, is *F*. Someone's believing *that* gives us no reason to think that he believes that if *a* is not *F*, something else is. But that is the belief Smith must have if he is to have a belief that his getting the job and having ten coins in his pocket makes true, and that is the belief he must have if he is to have a belief that Havit's owning a Ford makes true. Similarly, someone's believing *p* and recognizing that *p* entails *p ∨ q* is not enough for one to believe that *p ∨ else q* (that is, that $\sim p \rightarrow q$), which is the belief one must have if one is to have a belief that *q*'s being true makes true. Someone who does not believe that *p ∨ else q* believes *p ∨ q* in only a pickwickian sense.

Thus to say, as is said in the typical formulations of Gettier cases that their subjects *infer* the proposition that turns out to be true is misleading in two ways. First, to recognize that a proposition follows from some other(s) is not to infer the first from the second. There is more to inferring than recognizing logical relations. Second, if inferring amounts to coming to believe, the propositions supposedly inferred in Gettier cases (and which turns out to be true) are not ones their subjects infer, even if they see that they follow from propositions they believe.³

³ My thanks to Rodrigo Borges, James Gillespie, Greg Ray and James Simpson.