

# GETTIER UNSCATHED FOR NOW

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**ABSTRACT:** Moti Mizrahi (2016) argues that Gettier cases are unsuccessful counterexamples to the traditional analysis of knowledge (TAK) because such cases inadequately reveal epistemic failures of justified true belief (JTB); and because Gettier cases merely demonstrate semantic inadequacy, the apparent epistemic force of Gettier cases is misleading. Although Mizrahi claims to have deflated the epistemic force of Gettier cases, I will argue that the presence of semantic deficiency in Gettier cases neither requires nor indicates the denial of the epistemic force of those cases. I will provide an extracted version of Mizrahi's argument, which I believe to be most charitable to his motivation. Then I will offer a counterexample to a pivotal premise in Mizrahi's argument, ultimately rendering the argument unsound. Finally, upon the examination of a plausible objection, I conclude that Gettier cases are epistemically sustained.

**KEYWORDS:** Gettier, justified true belief, traditional analysis of knowledge

## Introduction

Gettier cases were formulated to challenge the *TAK*, by demonstrating that *JTB* does not necessarily entail knowledge (Feldman 2003, 37). Mizrahi (2016) argues that if Gettier cases can be shown to possess ambiguous designators, then those cases demonstrate semantic failure: “failing to refer to *x*,” but not epistemic failure: “failing to know that *p*” (33). If Mizrahi's argument is sound, then Gettier cases pose no problem for the debate about knowledge. Mizrahi aligns his notion with Kripke's (1977) speaker and semantic reference example:

Two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. They have a brief colloquy: ‘What is Jones doing?’ ‘Raking the leaves.’ ‘Jones,’ in the common language of both, is a name of Jones; it never names Smith. Yet, in some sense, on this occasion, clearly both participants in the dialogue have referred to Smith, and the second participant has said something true about the man he referred to if and only if Smith was raking the leaves (whether or not Jones was) (263).

Since the “two people” actually see Smith, Smith is the semantic referent of the referential designator: Jones. Though Jones is the referential designator used to speak about Smith in the question about what Jones is doing, the person (speaker) who responds with “raking the leaves” means that Smith is raking the leaves even though the semantic meaning is that Jones is raking the leaves. Kripke (1977) sums it up as follows:

So, we may tentatively define the speaker's referent of a designator to be that object

which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of the designator. He uses the designator with the intention of making an assertion about the object in question (which may not really be the semantic referent, if the speaker's belief that it fulfills the appropriate semantic conditions is in error). The speaker's referent is the thing the speaker referred to by the designator, though it may not be the referent of the designator, in his idiolect (264).

Thus, in context, "the speaker's referent of 'Jones' is Smith, whereas the semantic referent of 'Jones' is Jones" (Mizrahi 2016, 34).

Analogous to the illustration above, Mizrahi claims that the referential designators in Gettier-style cases are ambiguous. For example, Feldman's (2003) adapted version of Gettier's *Ten Coins* case will suffice to show that "Smith is justified in believing:

1c. Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

2c. The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" (25-26).

The proposition in question is *the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket*. Mizrahi (2016) contends that the "coins" in Feldman's extraction is an ambiguous designator because "the speaker's referent of 'coins' is the ten coins that are in Jones' pocket, whereas the semantic referent of 'coins' is the ten coins that are in Smith's pocket" (34). Thus, for Mizrahi, there is no problem with whether Smith knows that the person who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket, but merely a problem with Smith's failure to refer to Jones as the *man who will get the job* (35). Mizrahi's point is controversial, and possibly false, given the fact that Mizrahi fudges Gettier's intended avoidance of direct reference. However, I will grant Mizrahi's assumptions for the sake of argument.

Although Mizrahi (2016) assess five different Gettier and Gettier-style cases, his conclusion remains constant across the board, that "Gettier cases are cases of reference failure because the candidates for knowledge in these cases contain ambiguous designators" (33), which merely appear to be epistemic failures.<sup>1</sup> If that

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<sup>1</sup> Mizrahi addresses the "Fake Barn Case (FBC)," to show that "other so-called Gettier-style cases without false lemmas" succumb to the same semantic failures. Mizrahi acknowledges that the conditions for *JTB* are met but the ambiguous designator in FBC is 'barn.' Thus, "it is not clear that, by using 'barn,' *S* manages to successfully refer to what fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of 'barn,' which is different from what *S* wishes to talk about. This means that, upon considering the Fake Barn case, we may be confusing the fact that *S* fails to refer to what actually fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of 'barn,' which is a semantic fact about the case, with an epistemic fact, namely, that *S* doesn't know that there's a barn over there" (37-38).

is the case, then Gettier and Gettier-style cases are not successful in demonstrating that one could lack knowledge while maintaining *JTB*. In the following section I will scrutinize Mizrahi's argument in detail, offering an analysis of the premises involved and a counterexample to a pivotal premise of Mizrahi's anti-Gettier attempt.

### Assessment of Mizrahi's Argument

In the last section I provided an overview of Mizrahi's motivation to argue that Gettier and Gettier-style cases are misleading and thus unsuccessful in exposing *TAK*'s epistemic weakness. The following formal argument is a developed extraction of my own interpretation of Mizrahi's argument, which I believe to be the most charitable representation. I call it the *Anti-Gettier Argument*:

- (1) If Gettier cases are counterexamples to knowledge as *JTB*, then Gettier cases are examples of epistemic failure. (Basic)
  - "Gettier's argument against JTB can be summed up as follows:
    - G1. If knowledge is JTB, then *S* knows that *p* in a Gettier case.
    - G2. *S* doesn't know that *p* in a Gettier case.

*Therefore,*

- G3. It is not the case that knowledge is JTB" (Mizrahi 2016, 31).
- (2) If candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators, then Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure. (Basic)
  - "Gettier cases are cases of reference failure because the candidates for knowledge in these cases contain ambiguous designators" (Mizrahi 2016, 33).
- (3) If Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure, then it is not the case that Gettier cases are examples of epistemic failure. (Basic)
  - "I will argue that, contrary to appearances, Gettier cases are actually cases of semantic, not epistemic, failure" (Mizrahi 2016, 32).
- (4) Candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators. (Basic)
  - "In Gettier's Case I, the speaker's referent of 'coins' is the ten coins that are in Jones' pocket, whereas the semantic referent of 'coins' is the ten coins that are in Smith's pocket. For this reason, 'coins' is an ambiguous designator in Gettier's Case I" (Mizrahi 2016, 34).
- (5) If candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators, then it is not the case that Gettier cases are examples of epistemic failure. (HS 2, 3)

- (6) Thus, it is not the case that Gettier cases are examples of epistemic failure. (MP 4, 5)
- (7) Thus, it is not the case that Gettier cases are counterexamples to knowledge as *JTB*. (MT 1, 6)

The extracted argument above is valid, so there is no problem with the truth of (7) if all premises are true. Since premises (5) and (6) are derived premises, if someone disagrees with the truth of (7), then premises (1) – (4) are open for scrutiny. Because I agree with premises (1) & (2) and assume the truth of (4) for the sake of argument, I will briefly discuss them. I believe premise (3) is contentious and deserves attention because the integrity of Mizrahi’s argument depends on it. Here, I will start off by discussing what I believe to be the least controversial premises of Mizrahi’s argument.

Premise (1) simply states the standard for Gettier cases, that if *JTB* can be held without knowledge, then the *TAK* is incomplete or false. Premise (1) can be consistently held by both supporters of *TAK* and those who are convinced by Gettier-style cases. Thus, I will say no more about premise (1).

Premise (2) seems correct to me. Propositions or beliefs containing ambiguous designators involve semantic failures if the designators in question do not accidentally refer to the same thing. As shown above in the *Ten Coins* case, the “coins” are the ambiguous designator, since the coins in Smith’s pocket are not the coins Smith is referring to. Because Smith is referring to Jones’ coins, the belief that “the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket” refers to anybody but Jones’ coins is a semantic failure.

As alluded to in the last paragraph, premise (4) – the *candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators* – is plausible because in each case there is a conflation of two designators with slightly different referents. In the *Ten Coins* case for example, Smith’s belief that *the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket* is precisely because Smith knows that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. The ten coins in Smith’s pocket is not a designator in the example because Smith is referring to what is in Jones’ pocket, not his own. Mizrahi implies that all Gettier cases meet premise (4). Though Mizrahi may be incorrect, I will accept (4) for the sake of argument, time, and space.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, I turn to premise (3), which I believe to be the cornerstone of success for Mizrahi’s argument (stated again for clarity):

- (3) If Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure, then it is not the case that

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<sup>2</sup> Another potential problem surfaces if it can be demonstrated that Mizrahi misdiagnoses the ambiguous designator. Perhaps “Jones” is the ambiguous designator in the *Ten Coins* case.

Gettier cases are examples of epistemic failure. (Basic)

Premise (3), in other words, states that Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure, *only if* they are not examples of epistemic failure. Though Mizrahi is neither explicit about premise (3), nor noticeably clear about why semantic failure somehow negates epistemic failure, the indication that “Gettier cases are actually cases of semantic, not epistemic, failure” is overwhelming. Simply stated, the proposition is structured as such: In every case  $x$ , if  $x$  is a Gettier case ( $G$ ), then  $x$  is not an epistemic failure ( $\neg E$ ) and  $x$  is a semantic failure ( $S$ ):  $\forall x (G(x) \rightarrow \neg E(x) \wedge S(x))$ .

There are at least two conditions by which (3) is open for rejection, by demonstrating that: (i) at least one example of semantic failure involves epistemic failure; and (ii) at least one Gettier case contains both semantic and epistemic failure. I will borrow Mizrahi’s *Green Cheese* example<sup>3</sup> as a demonstration of (i), then, continuing with the same line of reasoning, I will demonstrate (ii), focusing on the *Ten Coins* case as outlined above.

The *Green Cheese* example is presented by Mizrahi as an illustration of the difference between semantic and epistemic failure but fails to differentiate between the two by only highlighting what Mizrahi believes to be semantic failure. However, I will reveal that the semantic failure of the *Green Cheese* example also involves an epistemic failure. The adapted proposition in question in Mizrahi’s *Green Cheese* example is:

1g. Moti believes the table in front of him is comprised of *matter*.

Moti believes that *matter* is green cheese. Note that in proposition 1g the speaker’s referent to *matter* is stuff comprised of green cheese, but the semantic referent to *matter* is stuff comprised of atoms. Since Moti believes the table in front of him is comprised of green cheese, he does not know that the table is made of matter. Thus, according to Mizrahi, Moti’s failure to know is merely semantic since what Moti is referring to when he says “matter” is not equivalent to the semantic referent of atoms. However, the semantic failure is entailed by the epistemic failure. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Mizrahi’s *Green Cheese* example: “To illustrate the difference between semantic failure...and epistemic failure..., suppose I believe that this table is made of matter. By ‘matter,’ however, I do not mean atoms that are made of subatomic particles. Rather, I use ‘matter’ to talk about green cheese. And I believe that everything in the universe, including this table, is made of green cheese. In that case, when I believe that this table is made of matter, I actually believe that this table is made of green cheese, since I use ‘matter’ to refer to green cheese. If I were to use ‘matter’ to refer to what fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of ‘matter,’ i.e., if I were to use ‘matter’ to refer to atoms, then perhaps I would know that this table is made of matter. But I use ‘matter’ to refer to green cheese, not atoms, and so my failure is semantic..., not epistemic...” (Mizrahi 2016, 40).

precisely Moti's failure to *know* the table is made of matter that leads to Moti's failure to refer to the semantic referent of matter, i.e., atoms. Thus, although the *Green Cheese* example involves an ambiguous designator, Moti fails "to know that *p*" and fails "to refer to *x*" (Mizrahi 2016, 40).

The same reasoning is carried through to Gettier's *Ten Coins* case. Proposition 2c – *the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket* – is the knowledge proposition in question. The semantic failure here is granted since Smith's belief that the ten coins of the man who will get the job are the coins in Jones' pocket and not his own. But, similar to the *Green Cheese* example above, Smith's failure to know that 2c is precisely why there is a failure to refer to the semantic referent, i.e., Jones' coins. Thus, in the *Ten Coins* case, Smith fails "to know that *p*" and fails "to refer to *x*."

Premise (3), then, is false. The consequent does not follow from the antecedent because it is possible that a least one case of epistemic failure involves semantic failure, and I have shown that at least one Gettier case, i.e., the *Ten Coins* case, contains both semantic and epistemic errors. Though *TAK* may turn out to be inoculated from Gettier-style reasoning, Mizrahi's argument does not accomplish that task. Next, I will turn to a potential objection and briefly offer a response to it.

### A Plausible Objection

As discussed above, Mizrahi's argument is unsound given the falsity of premise (3). In light of my counterexample to premise (3), that at least one Gettier case can be shown to fail both semantically and epistemically, there is a potential objection that aims to undermine my intuition. Perhaps Mizrahi's argument could be reworded to capture both epistemic and semantic failures in such a manner by the addition of "merely" (underlined in the restructured argument):

- (1\*) If Gettier cases are counterexamples to knowledge as *JTB*, then Gettier cases are merely examples of epistemic failure. (Basic)
- (2) If candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators, then Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure. (Basic)
- (3\*) If Gettier cases are examples of semantic failure, then it is not the case that Gettier cases are merely examples of epistemic failure. (Basic)
- (4) Candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators. (Basic)
- (5\*) If candidates for knowledge in Gettier cases contain ambiguous designators, then it is not the case that Gettier cases are merely examples of epistemic failure. (HS 2, 3)

- (6\*) Thus, it is not the case that Gettier cases are merely examples of epistemic failure. (MP 4, 5)
- (7) Thus, it is not the case that Gettier cases are counterexamples to knowledge as *JTB*. (MT 1, 6)

The introduction of one word to the argument undermines my counterexample. I suppose Mizrahi could say “yeah that’s what I meant,” but that is not yet the case. Nonetheless, the addition of “merely” in premise (3) changes the meaning to agree with my counterexample while maintaining structural validity. However, to maintain validity, premise (1) would need to conform as well, straying from the intention of Gettier’s cases. Nothing in Gettier-style cases suggests that “mere” epistemic failure is necessary to refute knowledge as *JTB*.

### Conclusion

I have examined a potential flaw in Gettier-style cases, specifically Moti Mizrahi’s argument that Gettier-style cases insufficiently refute the traditional analysis of knowledge, because they merely demonstrate semantic failures not epistemic failures. I developed a formal extraction of Mizrahi’s argument and established that a pivotal premise was false, thereby collapsing the *Anti-Gettier Argument*. A potential objection to my counterexample showed that the *Anti-Gettier Argument* could be restored, but only at the expense of expunging Gettier-style intentions. For now, it appears as though Gettier is out of the weeds.

### References

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