

# OBJECTING TO THE ‘DOESN’T JUSTIFY THE DENIAL OF A DEFEATER’ THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE: A REPLY TO FEIT AND CULLISON

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I explain Neil Feit and Andrew Cullison’s two proposed theories of knowledge, their initial No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds account and their ultimate ‘Doesn’t Justify the Denial of a Defeater’ account. I then offer original counterexamples against both of these theories. In the process of doing so, I both explain Feit and Cullison’s motivation for jointly offering their theories and recount counterexamples that others have offered against various theories that assert that knowledge is justified, true belief plus some condition concerning essential reliance.

KEYWORDS: knowledge, false beliefs, Gettier problem, Neil Feit, Andrew Cullison, Ted Warfield

## I. Introduction

In this paper, I explain Neil Feit and Andrew Cullison’s (2011) two proposed theories of knowledge, the No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds account and their ultimate ‘Doesn’t Justify the Denial of a Defeater’ account. I then offer original counterexamples against both of these theories. In the process of doing so, I both explain Feit and Cullison’s motivation for jointly offering their theories and recount counterexamples that others have offered against various theories that assert that knowledge is justified, true belief plus some condition concerning essential reliance.

## II. The No Essential Falsehoods Account of Knowledge and Criticisms of This Account

In *Epistemology* (2003), Richard Feldman offers the No Essential Falsehoods account of knowledge (NEF). It is as follows:

- $S$  knows  $p = df$   
(i)  $p$  is true  
(ii)  $S$  believes  $p$

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(iii)  $S$  is justified in believing  $p$

(iv)  $S$ 's justification for  $p$  does not essentially depend on any falsehood<sup>1</sup>

This account simply tacks an extra condition onto justified, true belief theory. This condition is meant to account for Gettier cases that show that having a justified, true belief is not equivalent to having knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

NEF can be criticized in at least two ways. First, there are cases that intuitively show that this account is too broad. That is, there are instances of non-knowledge that NEF considers to be knowledge. Second, cases offered by various authors have shown that sometimes you can have knowledge that derives from false beliefs – even false beliefs upon which you essentially depend. In other words, there are instances of knowledge that NEF cannot account for. So, this account also proves to be too narrow.

I will return to knowledge from false beliefs later, but let's first focus on cases where NEF proves to be too broad. In order to demonstrate this point, Neil Feit and Andrew Cullison, writing together, offered the following counterexample against NEF:

**Uncle George:** It is common knowledge in Smith's office that George is a wise and honest man. George has told Smith that he, George, is an uncle. He has a 'World's Greatest Uncle' mug on his desk, and so on. On the basis of all of this evidence, Smith believes that George is an uncle. In this particular instance, however, George has been pretending to be an uncle. The twist is that George now really is an uncle, unbeknownst to him. His estranged sister just had a baby boy.<sup>3</sup>

Smith has a justified, true belief that George is an uncle. Furthermore, George is actually an uncle. So, Smith's justification for his belief does not essentially depend on a falsehood. So, on NEF, Smith knows that George is an uncle. Intuitively, however, Smith does not know that Smith is an uncle.

Consider another case:

**DontKnowHeGot:** You have a generally trustworthy coworker in your office named DontKnowHeGot, who gives you a great deal of evidence that he owns a Ford vehicle. He talks about his Ford frequently, he has a Ford keychain, he has a Ford tattoo on his lower back, and he even named his firstborn son Ford and his firstborn daughter Forda. On the basis of all of this evidence, you justifiably come to believe that DontKnowHeGot owns a Ford. However, DontKnowHeGot has been trying to deceive you. He believes that he does not own a Ford. However, unbeknownst to DontKnowHeGot, the rusted-out shell of an old truck in his backyard is actually a 1939 Ford truck.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explication of this theory, see Feldman (2003, 25-36).

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of Gettier cases, see Gettier (1963).

<sup>3</sup> Feit and Cullison (2011, 289-290).

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You have a justified, true belief that DontKnowHeGot owns a Ford. And your justification for this belief does not essentially depend on a falsehood. Rather, you are essentially depending on a true claim – DontKnowHeGot in fact owns a Ford. Intuitively, however, you do not know that DontKnowHeGot owns a Ford.

Uncle George and DontKnowHeGot both show that NEF is too broad. The account determines that both of these instances of non-knowledge count as knowledge. But intuitively this conclusion is incorrect in both cases.

### III. Feit and Cullison’s Response to These Cases

Feit and Cullison attempt to save the NEF by offering a slightly edited version. This version is meant to account for Uncle George and other potential, similar cases, like DontKnowHeGot. They refer to this account as the No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds theory of knowledge (NEFJG). This account is as follows:

*S* knows *p* = df

(i) *S* believes *p*

(ii) *p* is true

(iii) *S* is justified in believing *p*

(iv) no ground that is essential to *S*’s justification for *p* justifies *S* in believing a falsehood.<sup>4</sup>

Condition (iv) accounts for our intuitive judgments in both Uncle George and DontKnowHeGot. In Uncle George, Smith’s justification for his belief that George is an uncle also justifies him in believing many falsehoods, including the claim that George believes that he is an uncle. So, on the NEFJG, Smith does not know that George is an uncle.

Similarly, in DontKnowHeGot you are justified in believing the false claim that DontKnowHeGot believes that he owns a Ford. So, your belief that DontKnowHeGot owns a Ford does not pass the fourth condition for knowledge offered by Feit and Cullison. So, you do not know that DontKnowHeGot owns a Ford. So, NEJFG can account for our intuitive judgments in these cases.

### IV. A Counterexample to the No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds Account

Though NEFJG matches our intuitions in Uncle George and DontKnowHeGot, it is too narrow in other respects. That is, it leaves out genuine instances of knowledge. Consider the following case:

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<sup>4</sup> Feit and Cullison (2011, 291).

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**Aunt Kathy:** Imagine that I see my Aunt Kathy wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring. On the basis of this evidence, I form the belief “My Aunt Kathy is wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring.” And, on the basis of that claim, I form the belief “If my Aunt Kathy is wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring, then she is wearing a ring.”

This appears to be a genuine instance of knowledge. However, it does not meet the four conditions offered by Feit and Cullison above. While I have a justified, true belief, condition (iv) is not met. In other words, one of the grounds essential to my justification for believing the conditional also justifies me in believing a falsehood. My ground that says that “My Aunt Kathy is wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring” justifies me in believing that the Seahawks won Super Bowl XX.<sup>5</sup> This belief, however, would be false. In fact, the Chicago Bears won Super Bowl XX. So, according to NEFJG, I do not have knowledge of the claim “If my Aunt Kathy is wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring, then she is wearing a ring.” However, it is intuitively clear that this belief is a genuine instance of knowledge. So, NEFJG fails.

One potential way to object to counterexamples against theories like NEFJG is to argue that there is some other nearby claim that is actually being essentially relied upon. Perhaps one might think that I am essentially relying on the fact that my Aunt Kathy is wearing a ring or the logical truth that if one is wearing a ring, then they must be wearing a ring. However, neither of those beliefs, even taken in conjunction, can get to the actual conditional that is the instance of knowledge in this case. Even if there are other, nearby beliefs that are needed to reach the conclusion, the conditional that is the object of my knowledge cannot be reached without the belief that my Aunt Kathy is wearing a Seahawks Super Bowl XX championship ring.<sup>6</sup>

## **V. Another Objection to the No Essential Falsehood-Justifying Grounds Account – Knowledge from False Beliefs**

Another criticism of NEF that also applies to Feit and Cullison’s NEFJG involves knowledge from false beliefs. There are numerous examples that philosophers have given of knowledge from false beliefs, but let’s focus on a famous case from Ted Warfield (2005):

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<sup>5</sup> This counterexample assumes that I lack the knowledge of who won this Super Bowl from another source but also realize how strange and rare a championship ring for a non-champion would be.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Murphy (2013) made a similar point in this journal when offering a counterexample involving a conditional claim against knowledge-from-knowledge.

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**Professor:** Counting with some care the number of people present at his talk, Warfield reasons: ‘There are 53 people at my talk; therefore my 100 handout copies are sufficient.’ His premise is false. There are 52 people in attendance – he double-counted one person who changed seats during the count.<sup>7</sup>

Even though Warfield is essentially depending on a falsehood – here “there are 53 people at my talk” – intuitively Warfield still has knowledge of his conclusion that “my 100 handout copies are sufficient.” On both NEF and NEFJG, Warfield would *not* have knowledge of his conclusion. So, these accounts fail to give the correct answer in this case. They both treat this instance of knowledge as non-knowledge. So, they are both too narrow.

One could potentially object to Warfield’s Professor case by claiming that Warfield is actually depending on the claim that “there are about 53 people at my talk.” So, since there are actually about 53 people at his talk, he is not essentially depending on a falsehood in order to reach his conclusion. Instead, he is essentially depending on a nearby, true claim.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with this objection is that it is offering a counterfactual situation (distinct from the actually offered case) whereby the theory would give the correct answer. But this counterfactual does nothing to disprove the fact that the theory cannot account for the original case, as stated. This sort of objection is basically building a strawman, by altering the cases offered and asserting that the altered cases can be accounted for by the theory in question. Again, this does nothing to show whether the theory can account for the original case, as offered.

So I grant that, in Professor, *if* Warfield had depended on the claim that “there are about 53 people at my talk,” then NEF and NEFJG *could* account for Warfield’s knowledge of his conclusion. However, that is not the claim upon which Warfield essentially depends in Professor. Rather, he essentially depends on the claim that “there are 53 people at my talk.” And *even when* he depends on this claim, he still has knowledge of his conclusion that “my 100 handout copies are sufficient.” NEF and NEFJG cannot account for this. So, the theories fail.

## VI. Feit and Cullison’s Attempt to Account for Knowledge from False Beliefs

Feit and Cullison offer a new theory in place of NEFJG in order to account for the sort of examples offered by Warfield and others. That is, they offer an account

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<sup>7</sup> Warfield (2005, 407-408). I edited the wording of this example in order to make it refer to Warfield, as he offers the example in the first-person.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Montminy (2014) offers this sort of objection against examples meant to show that knowledge can come from false beliefs, arguing that there are nearby beliefs of the subject by which they gain inferential knowledge.

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meant to permit some instances of knowledge from false beliefs. They attempt to do this through the use of defeaters. They define a defeater as follows:

*d* is a defeater (with respect to evidence *e* for *p*) =df. *d* is a true proposition such that *e* justifies *p* but the evidence set that results from adding *d* does not justify *p*.<sup>9</sup>

And they offer the following theory, which they call the ‘Doesn’t Justify the Denial of a Defeater’ account of knowledge (DJDD):

- S* knows *p* = df
- (i) *S* believes *p*
  - (ii) *p* is true
  - (iii) *S* is justified in believing *p*
  - (iv) no ground that is essential to *S*’s justification for *p* justifies *S* in believing the negation of a defeater<sup>10</sup>

In other words, condition (iv) says that when the denial of the justified falsehood serves as a defeater, then there is no knowledge. DJDD accounts for Professor, because if one added the claim that “there are *not* 53 people at the talk” to Warfield’s set of evidence, he would still be justified in believing his conclusion. Even when the denial of the justified falsehood (“there are 53 people at my talk”) is added to Warfield’s overall evidence, he is still justified in believing that he has enough copies of his handout.

## VII. Two Counterexamples against the ‘Doesn’t Justify the Denial of a Defeater’ Account of Knowledge<sup>11</sup>

Though DJDD handles Professor, there are potential counterexamples against it. I will now consider two of these counterexamples. The first counterexample is the standard sort of counterexample given against more basic no defeaters views. It does not seem as if Feit and Cullison’s more detailed no defeaters view can handle even this standard counterexample. Consider the following:<sup>12</sup>

**Grabit:** You see your student Tom Grabit stick a DVD in his coat pocket and sneak out of the library. You recognize Tom easily, given your many interactions with him. Meanwhile, Tom’s crime is reported to Tom’s mother in her room at a psychiatric hospital. And she replies that Tom didn’t do it. She claims that it was

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<sup>9</sup> Feit and Cullison (2011, 295).

<sup>10</sup> Feit and Cullison (2011, 295).

<sup>11</sup> The only robust challenge to DJDD offered thus far comes from Stephen Hetherington (2016). But Hetherington objects in a very different way than I do in this paper. His focus is on whether Feit and Cullison are offering a fallibilist or infallibilist account. Concluding that they are offering an infallibilist account, Hetherington then argues against DJDD on this basis.

<sup>12</sup> This counterexample is adapted from Feldman (2003, 35-36).

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his twin brother Tim. However, Tom does not actually have a twin. The mother is simply deluded. But you are unaware of all of this information involving Tom’s mother.

Intuitively, it is clear that you know that Tom Grabit stole the DVD from the library. But DJDD cannot account for this. You do not meet condition (iv). You have an essential ground (something like “the person stealing the DVD looks exactly like my student, Tom Grabit”) that justifies you in believing the negation of a defeater. The defeater here is the claim that “Tom’s mother says his twin brother Tim stole the DVD.” Given your evidence, you are justified in believing the negation of that defeater. You are justified in believing that “it is not the case that Tom’s mother says his twin brother Tim stole the DVD.” So, condition (iv) is not met. DJDD would say that you do not have knowledge in Grabit. This is clearly counterintuitive. So, we have good reason to reject DJDD.

Consider another counterexample, one meant to show DJDD does not account for all instances of knowledge from false belief:

**Blind Warfield:** Warfield is blind and asks one of his students to count how many people are at his talk. The student tells him that he counted 53. On the basis of the student’s claim, Warfield concludes that the 100 copies of his talk are more than sufficient. However, the student accidentally miscounted. There are actually 52 people at the talk.

Does blind Warfield know that he has enough copies of his talk? Intuitively, I say yes. However, although he has a justified, true belief, condition (iv) on DJDD is not met. The denial of his justified, false belief that there are 53 people at the talk serves as a defeater. Given that he did not do the counting himself, he lacks the sort of evidence that would allow for him to conclude that the number is around 53, though not 53 exactly.

Perhaps one could object that Warfield can reasonably conclude that the student’s count was slightly off, but he was generally in the vicinity of the right count. In other words, he still has good reason to believe that the count is around 53. Though I think that this sort of objection is changing our actual scenario to a counterfactual one (as explained above), let’s avoid this concern by filling out the scenario a bit more so as to account for this worry. Consider the following case:<sup>13</sup>

**Sometimes Prankster:** Imagine that the student that a blind Warfield asks to count the number of people in the audience is a bit of a prankster. Now, he does not always play pranks on Warfield, but he does so occasionally. Imagine that

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<sup>13</sup> This counterexample can also be used against NEF and NEFJG. And it is immune from the objection offered against Professor that claims that there is some other nearby claim that Warfield is essentially relying on.

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when the student first reports the total as 53, Warfield is just over the required level of justification for his belief that there are 53 people at his talk. This lower level of justification is due to the student's past trickery. Warfield uses this ground to conclude that his 100 copies are more than sufficient. Of course, there are only 52 people at the talk. Now, if the denial of Warfield's justified, false belief that there are 53 people were added to his set of evidence, Warfield would no longer be justified in believing the student's count at all, as the chance that he is playing a prank on Warfield has gone up significantly. So, his level of justification, previously hovering just above sufficient justification, now falls below that threshold. However, in actuality the student was not tricking him and made a small, innocent mistake, causing his count to be off by one.

In this scenario, intuitively, blind Warfield knows that he has enough copies of his talk.<sup>14</sup> Yet DJDD would not consider this case to be an instance of knowledge. The denial of the justified falsehood – the claim that “there are 53 people at my talk” – serves as a defeater of blind Warfield's belief that “my 100 handout copies are more than sufficient.” But this result is counterintuitive. So, we have good reason to reject DJDD. Yet again, another potential candidate for a correct conceptual analysis of knowledge is toppled.

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<sup>14</sup> This intuition is supported by the fact that we can assume that Warfield already factored in the likelihood that the student was tricking him before he decided to trust the student. In other words, the likelihood of his being tricked is already factored into his justification. So, if he is justified in the first place, the fact that his student miscounted should not harm Warfield's knowledge in this case.

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