

GETTIER CASES AND THE EVALUATOR'S PARADOX

John Ian K. BOONGALING

ABSTRACT: This paper identifies a structural feature of Gettier cases that has received little attention in the literature. In such cases, there is a decisive fact that explains why a subject's justified true belief fails to constitute knowledge, yet that fact is inaccessible to the subject. By contrast, an evaluator who correctly judges that the subject lacks knowledge must have access to it. I argue that this asymmetry generates what I call the Evaluator's Paradox: the epistemic position from which knowledge failure can be correctly diagnosed is precisely the position from which the belief cannot constitute knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Gettier cases, Evaluator's Paradox, epistemic access, knowledge failure, epistemic luck, justificatory defeat

1. Two Gettier Cases

Gettier cases exhibit an asymmetry between two epistemic positions: that of the subject who forms a belief and that of an evaluator who judges whether that belief constitutes knowledge. As the discussion below shows, this difference in epistemic position arises from an asymmetry in epistemic access¹ to a decisive fact² that explains knowledge failure in Gettier cases. In such cases, the subject possesses evidence that appears sufficient for knowledge, yet an evaluator with access to additional information can correctly judge that the subject's belief fails to constitute knowledge. In this paper, I argue that this asymmetry gives rise to what I call the Evaluator's Paradox: the epistemic position that enables an evaluator to correctly judge that the belief does not constitute knowledge is precisely the position that the subject cannot occupy while taking the belief to constitute knowledge.³

¹ 'Epistemic access' is understood here as the availability of a fact within a subject's epistemic position. A subject has epistemic access to a fact when that fact is available to the subject in a way that can inform the formation or evaluation of a belief.

² A 'decisive fact' is a fact that explains why a subject's justified true belief fails to constitute knowledge. In standard Gettier cases, this fact reveals either that the belief's truth is accidental relative to the subject's evidence or that the justification supporting the belief is defeated.

³ In this paper, the term 'paradox' is used to denote a tension between two epistemic conditions that are individually plausible but cannot be jointly satisfied in Gettier cases: the condition under which a belief may appear to constitute knowledge and the condition under which the failure of

Consider two familiar Gettier cases. In Case I (Gettier 1963, 122), Smith and Jones are both applying for a job. Smith has strong evidence that Jones will get the job and has ten coins in his pocket: the president of the company has assured him that Jones will be selected, and Smith has counted the coins in Jones's pocket. From these, Smith infers the following:

p: The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Unbeknownst to Smith, however, he himself will get the job—and he, too, has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's belief is therefore true and justified, but it does not constitute knowledge. Let

d: Smith—not Jones—will get the job, and Smith has ten coins in his pocket.

Consider next the Fake Barn Case⁴ (Goldman 1976, 772-73). Henry is driving through the countryside and sees what appears to be a barn from his vantage point. On the basis of visual perception, he forms the belief:

p: That is a barn.

Unbeknownst to Henry, the area is filled with highly realistic barn facsimiles that are visually indistinguishable from real barns from his vantage point. By sheer coincidence, Henry is in fact looking at a real barn. As in the previous case, Henry's belief is true and justified but does not constitute knowledge. Let

d: The area is filled with barn facsimiles indistinguishable from real ones.

In both cases—and indeed in all Gettier cases—a decisive fact—call it *d*—plays a crucial explanatory role. The subject lacks epistemic access to this fact, yet it explains why the belief, though true and justified, does not amount to knowledge.

2. The Evaluator's Paradox: An Argument

The structure of Gettier cases can be captured by the following argument. Let *S* denote the subject, *E* the evaluator, *p* the proposition believed by *S*, and *d* the decisive fact that explains the failure of knowledge in Gettier cases.

P1. In every Gettier case, there exists a decisive fact *d* such that *S* lacks epistemic access to *d*, and access to *d* would reveal that *S*'s belief that *p* fails to constitute knowledge—either because the belief's truth is accidental (epistemic luck) or because the justification supporting *p* is defeated (justificatory defeat).⁵

knowledge can be correctly evaluated.

⁴ Although Goldman published the Fake Barn Case in 1976, he credits Carl Ginet with the example.

⁵ Epistemic luck occurs when a belief is true, but its truth is due to coincidence relative to *S*'s evidence (see, e.g., Pritchard 2005). A justification is defeated when additional information

- P2. If *S* lacks epistemic access to *d*, then *S* does not know that *p*.
- P3. For an evaluator *E* to correctly judge whether *S* knows that *p*, *E* must have epistemic access to the decisive fact *d*.
- P4. If *E* lacks epistemic access to *d*, then *E*'s epistemic position with respect to judging whether *S* knows that *p* is indistinguishable⁶ from *S*'s.
- P5. If *E*'s epistemic position is indistinguishable from *S*'s in this respect, correct evaluation of whether *S* knows that *p* is not possible.
- P6. If *S* gains epistemic access to *d*, the initial appearance of knowledge collapses⁷ since *S* recognizes the epistemic defect responsible for the belief's failure.
- C. Correct evaluation of whether *S* knows that *p* is possible only when *E* has epistemic access to *d*. However, whenever *d* is accessible, it reveals that *S*'s belief fails to constitute knowledge. Therefore, the epistemic position from which *E* can correctly judge that *S* does not know that *p* is precisely the epistemic position which, if occupied by *S*, would make it impossible for *S*'s original belief that *p* to constitute knowledge. This is the Evaluator's Paradox.

3. Deriving and Defending the Evaluator's Paradox

Let us begin by establishing that C follows from P1 – P6 in the argument above. From P1 and P2, it follows that in any Gettier case, the subject *S* does not know that *p*, since the decisive fact *d*, which explains the failure of knowledge, remains inaccessible to *S*. From P3, correct evaluation of whether *S* knows that *p* requires that the evaluator *E* has epistemic access to *d*. From P4 and P5, if *E* lacks access to *d*, then *E*'s epistemic position is indistinguishable from that of *S*, and correct evaluation of whether *S* knows that *p* becomes impossible. Finally, P6 states that if *S* gains access to *d*, the appearance of knowledge collapses, since the decisive fact *d* reveals the epistemic defect responsible for the belief's failure. Taken together, these relations show that the epistemic position from which *E* can correctly judge that *S* does not know that *p* is precisely the epistemic position which, if occupied by *S*, would make

undermines or overrides the evidential support for a belief (see, e.g., Pollock and Cruz 1999). In Gettier cases, the decisive fact *d* may function either by revealing that the belief's truth is merely accidental relative to *S*'s evidence or by undermining the justificatory connection between the evidence and the belief.

⁶ Two epistemic positions are indistinguishable in this context when they provide the same evidential basis for evaluating whether *S* knows that *p*, including the same access (or lack of access) to the decisive fact *d*.

⁷ This does not imply that *S* cannot subsequently form a new belief that constitutes knowledge. Rather, the point is that the original belief is revealed not to constitute knowledge once the decisive fact *d* becomes accessible.

it impossible for *S*'s original belief that *p* to constitute knowledge. The conclusion *C* therefore follows from P1 – P6.

If the premises of the argument above are true, then the argument is sound. P1 and P2 capture the defining structure of Gettier cases: a decisive fact *d* exists that is hidden from *S* and that would, if revealed, expose the belief's accidental truth or its justificatory defeat. In Gettier's Case I, for example, if Smith learns that he—not Jones—will get the job and that he has ten coins in his pocket, he recognizes that the truth of his belief resulted from an unnoticed coincidence. P3 is also true, since an evaluator *E* can diagnose knowledge failure only if *d* is accessible to them. Similarly, in the Fake Barn Case, *E* can correctly judge that Henry does not know that he is looking at a barn only if *E* has access to the fact that the countryside contains numerous barn facsimiles that are indistinguishable from real barns. P4 and P5 follow directly from this structure: if *E* lacks access to *d*, *E*'s evidential situation is indistinguishable from that of *S* and therefore cannot support a correct evaluation of whether *S* knows that *p*. Finally, P6 records the collapse of the appearance of knowledge once *d* becomes accessible to *S*. Thus, in both canonical cases, access to *d* reveals that the belief's truth depends on coincidence or that the justification supporting it is defeated. Since each premise captures a structural feature of Gettier cases, the argument is therefore sound.

4. Epistemic Access and the Structure of Gettier Cases

The argument above reveals a deeper structural feature of Gettier cases. The paradox arises from an asymmetry in epistemic access to the decisive fact *d* and this asymmetry places *S* and *E* in different epistemic positions. At this point, it is important to note that a genuine Gettier case occurs only when *S* lacks access to *d* while *E* possesses it. In this configuration, *S*'s belief appears to satisfy the ordinary conditions for knowledge from *S*'s epistemic position. However, since *E* has access to *d*, they can correctly judge that the belief fails to constitute knowledge. This asymmetry in epistemic access therefore provides a structural characterization of Gettier cases: *d* must remain inaccessible to *S* while remaining accessible from the epistemic position occupied by *E*.

If neither *S* nor *E* has access to *d*, the epistemic defect remains invisible to both. In that situation, the belief appears to satisfy the ordinary conditions of knowledge, but no correct evaluation of its failure is possible. Conversely, if *S* gains access to *d*, the appearance of knowledge collapses: *S* recognizes the epistemic defect of their belief. In such cases, the characteristic structure of a Gettier case disappears, since the belief no longer presents itself as knowledge even from *S*'s epistemic position.

From the foregoing discussion, Gettier cases arise only under a distinctive asymmetry of epistemic access between *S* and *E* with respect to *d*: *S* lacks access to *d* while *E* possesses it. This asymmetry is significant because *d*, by its nature, explains the failure of knowledge either through epistemic luck or through justificatory defeat. It is precisely this structure that gives rise to the Evaluator's Paradox.

5. Conclusion

Gettier cases reveal a structural asymmetry between the epistemic positions of the subject *S* and the evaluator *E*. A decisive fact *d* explains the failure of knowledge in such cases, yet *S* lacks epistemic access to it. By contrast, an evaluator *E* who correctly diagnoses the failure of knowledge must have access to *d*.

The resulting picture is striking. Evaluation becomes possible only when *d* is accessible, yet access to *d* reveals that the belief fails to constitute knowledge. Whenever *S* lacks access to *d*, the belief may appear to satisfy the ordinary conditions for knowledge; yet in that configuration, correct evaluation becomes impossible for any *E* who occupies the same epistemic position as *S*.

This structural feature of Gettier cases constitutes the Evaluator's Paradox: the epistemic position from which *E* can correctly judge that *S* does not know that *p* is precisely the epistemic position which, if occupied by *S*, would make it impossible for *S*'s original belief that *p* to constitute knowledge. The paradox therefore reveals a structural feature of Gettier cases: their correct diagnosis presupposes an epistemic position that *S* cannot occupy.

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