**Edmund Gettier’s “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”**



**Instructions:**

*Read the below article discussing the relevance of Edmund Gettier’s challenge to long held definition of knowledge, Justified True Belief. When you are finished, attempt to explain what the Gettier problem is and how the writer attempts to resolve it.*

If you’ve seen someone talk about the “Gettier Problem”, “Gettier Paper”, or the issue of Justified True Belief (JTB), then you’ve heard about the fantastic 1963 short paper written by Edmund Gettier. And despite being created over half a century ago, it still has its applications and continues to rock the world of epistemology, logic, the philosophy of science.

**Who is Gettier?**

Edmund Gettier is an American philosopher and Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and one of the few philosophers to fit the two following criteria: i. radically shake the foundations of philosophy with a two-page paper and ii. still be alive. With the fervor that some philosophers talk about Gettier’s challenge to Justified True Belief (JTB), you’d assume that he was among one of the ancient greats. You might also assume that to get a whole problem named after him (The “Gettier Problem”) he’d have more than one paper widely acknowledged as his leading efforts. Surprisingly enough, Gettier’s paper, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” is his one and only established argument. Talk about concise!

**What Does The Paper Deal With?**

The paper itself is composed of no more than a few interspersed sentences, some formal arguments, and 2 case examples. The simplicity of the paper almost gives you what I refer to as a case of the Jackson Pollock feels (“I could do that! My four year old could do that!”) but concise does not mean effortless. The paper provides us with beautifully realistic and accessible scenarios through which we might question the merit of the almighty JTB.

Here is an example that Gettier provides:

*Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the fol1owing conjunctive proposition: (d) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails: (e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (e) is true. But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not KNOW that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job.*

*This examples show that definition (a) does not state a sufficient condition for someone's knowing a given proposition. The same cases, with appropriate changes, will suffice to show that neither definition (b) nor definition (c) do so either.*

But first let me ask, when should we grant beliefs a more hefty value? Are beliefs we form with no justification for believing in them just as valuable as beliefs that we have formed through constant attempts to justify and reevaluate the validity of that belief? Is “I believe this just because it makes me feel good” intrinsically as valuable as “I believe this because I’ve researched it, asked experts, effectively tried to debunk it, and held it as objectively and with as much skepticism as possible until I eliminated the strongest possible counterarguments to it?”

Most would agree that it’s better to try to justify our beliefs rather than holding beliefs with no justification. The reason for this being is likely because it is easier to hold false beliefs when they are unjustified than it is to hold false beliefs when they are justified. In essence, justified beliefs are supposedly closer to being true beliefs.

**Philosophy’s Trust in the JTB**

This is where philosophers have historically drawn the line between what constitutes mere belief and what constitutes knowledge: you’re considered to have “knowledge” when you: i. have a *belief*, ii. that belief is *justified*, and iii. that belief is *true*.

So maybe you’re beginning to see why Gettier’s paper shakes up some commonly held standards in philosophy, since he’s asking us whether or not Justified True Belief really is knowledge like we say it is. You might be thinking that it’s a ridiculous question to ask: “if your belief is true, and your belief is justified, why SHOULDN’T it count as knowledge?! What more does Gettier want from us?”

Gettier’s basis for arguing otherwise is that these conditions we set up to qualify belief as knowledge aren’t sufficient enough to successfully delineate knowledge from belief. He proves quite succinctly that erroneous cases of “knowledge” can fall through the sieve of the JTB.

What’s more, these cases are not so akin to more fanciful thought experiments in philosophy: the scenarios given are grounded in reality just enough that any reader could imagine themselves actually getting into a similar scenario. Most of us have had mix-ups or miscommunications that mirror the errors committed by Gettier’s case subjects Smith and Jones.

**Is it *Really* a Problem?**

Some people might look at Gettier’s argument and think, “So what? The JTB is good enough. Perfection isn’t realistic, just shrug it off and move on”. The problem is that if this attitude were applied to most major logical concepts, the very fabric of logic would just unravel like a cheap sweater. In philosophy and logic, handy dandy good enoughs known as heuristics are also known as something a bit more derogatory: logical fallacies. Logical fallacies are methods of reasoning that usually have some vital flaw in them, relying on concepts or ideas that are easily mislead and soon direct to falsehoods and the dark side of rhetoric.

We’re not looking for perfection in philosophy necessarily, but it’s generally agreed upon that Gettier showed us all something we need to do, and that is to tailor our definitions surrounding belief and knowledge to better fit the realities of human communication and understanding. “Justify your beliefs and only hold true beliefs” is still good advice, no matter what paper comes out in the world of philosophy. All we’re saying is, that might not be enough to feel so confident about our delineation between what counts as belief and what counts as knowledge.

**Which Leads Us To…**

Gettier’s famous problem kick started an awakened search for precise and refined epistemological understandings of truth and knowledge. His short paper lit a fire under philosophy’s armchair, leaving smoke and flames that still burn fiercely, demanding us to question what we believe, what we know, and how we justify it all.