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Contextualist Solutions to Gettier

A Gettier case is a hypothetical scenario which aims to show that the tri-fold Justified

True Belief condition, what we take to be minimally required for us to say that a subject has

knowledge of something, is lacking in some substantial sense to account for all instances of

knowledge attribution. The typical response to the challenge posed by Gettier is to modify the

tri-fold Justified True Belief condition by the addition of a fourth condition that will "shield"

against the problems posed by Gettier cases. In the following essay I will argue that Gettier

cases essentially share the same structural form as that of the Academic Skeptical hypotheses,

amended to ordinary contextual circumstances, and that DeRose's "Contextualist Solution"

successfully resolves, not only the ordinary, or typical Gettier scenarios, but also those of the

highly skeptical variety.

The minimum conditions required for an epistemic agent to be judged to have

knowledge, as presented by Gettier in "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" are:

(1)   S has to be justified that p.
(2)   S has to believe that p.
(3)   And p has to be true.

There are a wide variety of Gettier cases that all provide examples in which an epistemic agent

meets the conditions listed above, but we judge an them to not have knowledge, primarily

because of some unknown deficiency in the evidence that they used to form the belief in

question. To illustrate more clearly, here is an example of a typical Gettier case that includes this

"unknown deficiency":

(1)   Smith and Jones are both applying for the same job. Smith has strong testimonial evidence (a) that Jones will get the job and strong perceptual evidence that (b) Jones has five dimes in his pocket.

(2)   Smith infers from (a) and (b) that the man who will get the job has five dimes in his pocket.

(3)   And the man who gets the job does have five dimes in his pocket.

(4)   Unknown to Smith, he himself has five dimes in his pocket and it is actually Smith himself who gets the job, thus it is true that (3).

(5)   Although Smith meets the minimal conditions for knowledge in (1), (2), and (3), because of (4) we judge him to not have knowledge that the man who gets the job has five dimes in his pocket.

If we were to examine further Gettier cases we would see that they all shared a similar form which I have outlined:

(1)   S has strong evidence that p.

(2)   S infers from p that q.

(3)   And q is true.

(4)   Unknown to S, p is false.

(5)   Although S meets the minimal conditions for knowledge in (1), (2), and (3), because of (4) we do not judge S to have knowledge that q.

Now, here is an example of a typical Academic Skeptical Hypothesis affixed to a Gettier form of the kind that has just been shown above:

(1)   Smith has strong perceptual evidence that he has hands.

(2)   Smith infers from his having hands that there is an external world.

(3)   And there is an external world.

(4)   However, unknown to Smith, he does not have hands, but instead is a brain in a vat that has been electrochemically stimulated to perceive that he has hands.

(5)   Though Smith has strong perceptual evidence that he has hands and he has inferred correctly to the belief that there is an external world, and there really is an external world, we still judge that he does not know that there is an external world because his original belief (his having hands) is false.

By affixing a typical Academic Skeptical Hypothesis to a Gettier form as outlined earlier, we can see that Gettier cases do not present us with a new problem, but rather a variation on a

common theme, that theme revolving around skepticism about the external world. The only

difference between Gettier cases and the more familiar Skeptical Hypotheses however, is that

they involve ordinary beliefs and the possibility that there is an unknown state of affairs that the

subject is in the dark about. A Skeptical Hypothetical Scenario similarly plays on our anxiety

about there being some state of affairs, our being brains in vats, that is beyond the scope of our

epistemic access.

Keith DeRose's essay, "Solving the Skeptical Problem," attempts to answer exactly why we

find Skeptical Hypotheses so compelling through what he terms the Subjunctive Conditionals

Account (SCA). DeRose then attempts to resolve the skeptical problem through what he terms

Contextual Analysis. My aim now turns towards attempting to argue that if we can bridge

Gettier cases with Skeptical Hypotheses viz. SCA, that is, identify them as mirror images of one

another, and if DeRose's Contextual Analysis successfully resolves one kind of Skeptical

Scenario, then perhaps it can also be used to resolve the other.

A typical Academic Skeptical Scenario runs something like this:

(1)   Smith doesn't know that he's not a brain in a vat.
(2)   If Smith doesn't know that he's not a brain in a vat, then he
        doesn't know that he has hands.
(3)   Therefore, Smith doesn't know that he has hands.

This argument's ability to draw us in and make us wonder if we really do have hands can be

attributed to the following principle underlying premise (1) which DeRose calls SCA:

If s believes that p, even if p is false, then we judge that S
doesn't know that p.

In the typical form of the Skeptical Hypothesis, SCA serves to explain why we think Smith is

never in a strong enough epistemic position to know that he's not a Brain in a V at. That is, even

if he was a Brain in Vat, he wouldn't know it, and he would always take himself to be in a strong epistemic position and his having hands to be true. A strong epistemic position is something like believing that one has strong evidence in their possession towards a given belief. This principle holds for all cases of Skeptical Hypotheses as well as Gettier cases. Consider the Gettier case concerning the man who gets the job. If Smith believes that Jones will get the job because he considers himself to have strong evidence towards that belief, and the idea that his evidence towards that belief is not considered to be questionable, then Smith doesn't know that Jones will get the job, and by this token, any inferences he makes using this as a basis, even when true, cannot properly be called knowledge. Similarly in the Brain in a Vat version of a Gettier case, if Smith believes that he has hands because it's so obvious that he, does despite the fact that he is really a Brain in a Vat, then, his inference that there is an external world cannot be counted as knowledge even when it is true that there is an external world.

As we can see, Gettier cases and Academic Skeptical Hypotheses do get their intuitive appeal from the same principle, SCA, which acts as a means to shift between ordinary contexts and highly skeptical contexts. Imagine the Gettier version of the brain in a vat scenario without the addition of premise (4). It is very easy to see that if (4) had never been introduced, we would not have thought to even been brought to the problem that we are at now. But the hypothesis that was introduced in (4) played on our underlying fears viz. SCA, so we shifted from talk of ordinary beliefs, to talk of beliefs that we could never prove or disprove because they are so out of the realm of ordinary experience.

But, by recognizing that we have altered the conditions of knowledge through (4) in the Brain in a Vat scenario, and noticing that the typical Gettier case plays on this same context-shift,

we can ask if we are able to resolve them both in the same manner. DeRose posits that the

strength of SCA can be mitigated when we recognize it as the determinant in our assenting to

Skeptical Hypotheses and, when we apply a contextual semantical method to a Skeptical

Hypothesis itself.

Once I have outlined how Contextual Analysis can be applied to the Brain in a Vat case,

which is a case that makes demands that are of exceptionally high epistemic standards, I will

show that a Gettier case isn't that compelling when we consider it within the context of lower, or,

ordinary epistemic standards and, that most Gettier scenarios can be bypassed altogether by

never having to make the inferential leap that an epistemic agent makes in most Gettier cases.

Within a Contextualist framework, typical questions concerning the truth or falsehood of

ordinary beliefs can be deferred to a simple investigation about the ordinary belief in question.

Take this scenario:

> (1) A grandmother goes to visit her grandson assuming he is well.
> (2) The grandson is gravely ill yet everyone in the household has agreed to keep it secret from the grandmother and so they lie to her and tell her he is well.
> (3) The grandmother doubts whether or not her grandson is well.
> (4) The grandmother strengthens her epistemic position (i.e., searches for strong evidence) by conducting further investigations, i.e., by seeing him up close for herself, or having people not of the household verify this information for her.
> (5) Upon strengthening her epistemic position, the grandmother discovers that her grandson is not well.

This scenario serves to show that in cases of ordinary beliefs, an epistemic agent is always in a

strong epistemic position, should the epistemic agent make an attempt to investigate that

ordinary belief further. But skeptical scenarios cannot be resolved this easily. They are not of an

ordinary context, but rather of one that appears to require an epistemic agent to be in an position

that cannot ever be attained. And because the Skeptical Hypothesis in question plays on our intuition about SCA, we are always forced to concede to the Skeptical position.

So what is it to be in a strong epistemic position in regards to the Skeptical Hypothesis? DeRose proposes the following conditions:

    (1)   S believes that p.
    (2)   And p is true *in the actual world*.
    (3)   And p is true *in worlds sufficiently close to the actual world*.

Interestingly enough, an ordinary belief, such as "Jones is the man who will be hired," has a truth value that can vary widely even when one considers possible worlds near the actual world. For something like the belief that "I have hands" to be false in the sense that a skeptical hypothesis asks of it, namely, one is in actuality a Brain in a Vat that has been electrochemically stimulated to believe that they have hands, one has to travel far beyond nearby possible worlds, thus not fulfilling condition (3) of being in a strong epistemic position. We find then, that we are in a much stronger epistemic position with regards to Skeptical Hypotheses than we initially thought. In fact, based on this Contextualist account of the Brain in a Vat scenario, we don't have to wonder at possibility of the Skeptical Hypothesis at all, we can discount it.

What does this mean for the typical Gettier case we have been considering this whole time though? If the strongest version of a Gettier case we could think of, the Brain in a Vat version, which is also a close relative of a Skeptical Hypothesis, could be resolved using the Contextual Method, and we had stipulated that weaker versions of a Skeptical Hypothesis could be resolved by an appeal to simple investigation, like in the grandmother scenario, then we should be able to apply both of these methods to typical Gettier cases.

In the typical Gettier case we have been considering Smith takes the testimonial evidence and the perceptual evidence to both be very strong reasons for his conclusion. Yet, the testimonial evidence can always be investigated further. Perhaps upon further poking and prodding, Smith discovers that the testimony is faulty, or learns through asking other sources that the source of his information that "Jones will get the job" likes to play practical jokes, etc. In those cases where further investigation occurs, Smith would never make the inferential leap to "the man who gets the job has five dimes in his pocket." Similarly, Smith could consider the testimonial evidence and ask himself if there are nearby possible worlds where the source of that testimony is lying, mistaken, etc. Smith finds that there are numerous nearby possible worlds where that can quite easily be the case and so again decides to not make the dreaded inferential leap that lands him in the awkward position of having a justified true belief that is paradoxically, not-knowledge. So the solution, if it can be called that, to typical Gettier cases, is that by and large, the inferences that lead to problems are avoided altogether through a Contextual Analysis condition.

Having shown how Gettier cases can be construed as ordinary context versions of Skeptical Hypothetical cases, I have attempted to resolve the more difficult of the two, the Skeptical Hypothetical case, by deferring to DeRose's "Contextualist" solution. In doing this, I have shown that Gettier cases can be resolved by not allowing the subject to make the inferential leap that lands him in a position where he meets the minimal conditions for knowledge but cannot be said to actually have knowledge. Yet, this move has not denied the subject from making any inferences whatsoever, in fact, there have turned out to be many ordinary beliefs, such as the belief about having hands, that meet the minimal conditions for knowledge and do

not fall into the problem that Gettier poses, and these types of beliefs are far more substantial than whether someone has gotten the job or not.

Works Cited

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