

## ON KNOWING X KNOWS THAT *p*, AND THE QUEST FOR RATIONALITY

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One of the major preoccupations of modern epistemologists from Descartes to present positivistic "belief philosophers," is the setting of standards or criteria for knowing what. "How do we decide, in any particular case, whether we know?" Or, "how do we know that we know what?"

Let us then, call or label such attempts at providing grounds for epistemological claims as, with due apologies to Wittgenstein, "knowledge name-game", the rules of which are thought to contribute a web of stipulations on the possibility of rational discourse. The question whether one is justified in asserting that he knows something is, to these epistemologists, necessarily tied up to the idea of rationality. If one wishes to engage in a rational discourse, he must be prepared to intellectually warrant his statements. Indicating *p* as a cognition assertion, assuming a definite cognitive meaning, is, therefore, not only showing the grounds on which *p* is cognitively meaningful or epistemologically justified but also, in effect, making rational discussion an intelligibly rewarding business or pursuit. In modern epistemology, rationality is, in short, equated with justifiability.

The stake of the question on the ultimate explication of how one knows *p* cannot, however, be overemphasized. Regarded as the end-all and, perhaps, itself the *raison d'être* of modern epistemology, it is a ticklish or exacting query, which almost every theorist of knowledge has sought to resolve once and for all. As to when and how it is going to be finally resolved remains unknown. What seems only clear at the outset is that everybody, by reason of profession or otherwise, in one way or another, had engaged himself in the business of correctly naming something "knowledge".

This paper then hopes to discuss the issue of knowledge and rationality via a critical explication of "X knows that *p*". How do we decide whether X knows *p* and can we possibly point to the necessary linkage between our knowing "X knows that *p*" and rationality? Can we decide as well whether knowledge has any essential foundation?

### I

Traditionally, knowledge is thought to be "justified true belief" or something of that sort. If X claims to know *p*, then *p* must be true, X must believe that *p* and X must have some grounds for *p*. In other words, this justifiability principle states that:

X knows p, if and only if (IFF):

- (a) p is true,
- (b) X believes that p,

and

- (c) X is **justified** in believing that p.

X is said to possess a certain knowledge p only when he is able to meet the subjective and objective, as well as the "evidence" requirements of knowledge, viz., X believes what he asserts, X has warrant for what he believes to be true, and p is indeed true.

However, Gettier (1963: 121-123) in his article *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* which has initiated a flurry of discussion (Clark, 1963: 46-48) and controversy among epistemologists, has come to challenge the traditional explication of knowledge, of X knowing p. He wants to refute the traditional definition of knowledge by showing the inadequacies of traditional analysis of "X knows p". Taking on the necessary and sufficient conditions (namely, propositional truth, belief, and justifiability of the belief), which traditional epistemology has practically held canonical, Gettier presents cases in which such conditions are true for some propositions, though it is at the same time false that X, the knower, knows the knowledge claim. In each case, a proposition which may in fact be true is believed on grounds which are false.

Take Gettier's first counter-example.

(1) Jones is the man who will get a job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Suppose Smith, who, like Jones, applied for the same job, has strong evidence for believing that (1). Suppose further that Smith's evidence for (1) is that the president of the company has assured him that it is Jones who, ultimately, will get the job and he, Smith, has counted the coins in Jones's pocket earlier. So Smith in this sense has "knowledge" of (1), in the traditional sense of the expression.

Moreover, proposition (1) entails

(2) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Then let us also suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (1) to (2), and let us accept (2) on the basis of (1), for which Smith is "justified". Is Smith also justified in believing that (2)? What if, unknown to Smith, Smith himself has ten coins in his pocket and will be the one who gets the job? Proposition (2) is true, but statement (1), from which Smith has deduced (2), is false.

Certainly, in this case, Smith cannot be said to know (2) with certainty. That Smith believes (2) is true, and that Smith is warranted in believing that (2), are matters of fact.

Although Smith is not aware that he himself will get the job, nor does he know about the number of coins his pocket contains, statement (2) is true in view of the later stipulated circumstances. But Smith's belief that (2) is on the account of the number of coins in Jones's pocket. The basis is simply mistaken! Smith falsely believes Jones to be the man who will get the job.

There is no gainsaying, however, that the first counter-example appears to expose one alleged major inadequacy of the traditional definition of knowledge. That is, it is possible for X to believe that p, for p to be true and for X to have a warrant for this belief, by X's basis is utterly wrong — and therefore, X cannot be said to possess knowledge of p at all.

This counter-example, however, falls short in showing that knowledge is not "justified true belief." If we are able to show that people may have some "justified true belief" but still do not possess "knowledge," does it necessarily rule out the possibility that knowledge is some kind of a warranted belief? Does it mean that "knowledge" does not involve any justification whatsoever of our truth claims" (Gettier, however, does not explicitly state in the paper that his intention is to show that knowledge rules out the possibility of justified truth claims, and therefore, Gettier may be immune to possible absurd consequences which are attributed to this position). In other words, can it be shown, on the basis of the possibility that X believes that p, p is true, X has good grounds for believing that p, and yet, X cannot be said to possess "knowledge" — that the traditional conception of knowledge is altogether dispensable or utterly false?

Also, if we come to think about the entailment from (1) to (2), in the light of the later stipulations on factual circumstances, (1) is untrue and therefore may, logically speaking, entail anything, either true or false. In the strictest sense, Smith can never be justified at all in his belief that (2)! He does not, in the traditional meaning of the expression, possess any "knowledge" of (2), because — in the first place — he has no basis (true basis, that is) for it.

Some foundationalist theorists of knowledge are quite quick at providing an ad hoc qualification to the traditional definition of knowledge in avoiding the kind of objection or confusion Gettier's first case raises or creates. That is,

X knows p IFF:

- (a) p is true
- (b) X believes that p,
- (c) X has the right evidence for p.

But as we shall see later, this, too, has problems. For some moment, let us defer our discussion on this qualification as we continue to account for Gettier's counter-examples.

Consider then this shortened version of Gettier's second counter-example:

- (1) Jones owns a Ford, and
- (2) Smith has a very strong evidence for (1).

Smith's evidence is that Jones has always owned a Ford, Smith has always seen him riding on a Ford and that, while driving a Ford, Jones has just offered Smith a ride. Then Smith also has another friend Brown the whereabouts of whom Smith is totally ignorant. So choosing a place at random, Smith constructs the statement

- (3) Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Paris.

Seeing (1) entailing (3) (i.e., by Addition), Smith infers that (3) is true, of course, on the basis of his evidence for (1). (That is, if  $p$  is true, " $p \vee q$ " is always true). Is Smith's evidence for (1) valid as his evidence for (3), in view of the entailment? Suppose Jones does not own a Ford, he has just rented one when he offered Smith a ride and, by sheerest coincidence, Smith is in Paris — does it mean it possesses any "knowledge" of (3)? While (3) may be true and that Smith believes that (3) may likewise be true, Smith, to Gettier, does not know (3).

Similarly, in his first counter-example, Gettier gives us an ersatz situation where we are forced, supposedly, to admit that X does have strong evidence for " $p$  or  $q$ " but, as a matter of fact, does not "know" it.

In other words, the second counter-example is: Suppose X believes, with strong evidence, that  $p$  from which in turn he infers, by Addition, " $p \vee q$ ". But, unknown to X, " $\sim p \cdot q$ ". Allegedly, he counter-example is able to show that indeed X believes that  $p$  on good grounds, and that  $p$  is true, but still it is impossible on our part to say that X knows  $p$ .

But here lies the crux of the matter. The factual basis of (3)'s truth is no longer Smith's evidence for (1), but the fact that Brown is in Paris. That (3) is logically necessitated by (1) or that (3) is "true" on the basis of (1), is actually a matter of logic. And one should not confuse logical truth with empirical truth. For (3) to be an empirical assertion or be factually true, it must have a factual or empirical basis of its own. Parenthetically therefore, one has to make a distinction between "factual or empirical knowledge" and logical truth.

Upon casual inspection, Gettier appears successful in refuting the traditional conception of knowledge. But on closer analysis, Gettier's counter-example qua counter-example is not diametrically opposite to the traditional formulation. It only stipulates on the possibility of X having to believe that  $p$ , claiming to have some evidence for it when actually X has no correct justification for his belief; X is merely guessing. Logically speaking, Gettier's

counter-example is contingent with the traditional conception of knowledge; hence, as such, it does not (and cannot) rule out the possibility of knowledge involving some "justified true belief."

Furthermore, at a glance, Gettier's second counter-example would seem logically consistent. But on closer look, it is not. Statement (1) is false. This is the reason why Smith cannot possibly know (3). What is earlier assigned as the condition for validating the knowledge claim of Smith is rendered inconsistent in view of the contradictory fact, viz., Jones does not own a Ford at all! This fact, of course, renders the earlier claim that Smith has always known Jones to have owned a Ford and has strong evidence for it. Which really is which? (The problem with suppositions is that one can appear to state contradictions which seem unharmed to the entire contention. But the point is, in the case of Gettier's second counter-example, either Jones owns a Ford or he does not; it cannot be both. If (1) is false, why make it as the basis for asserting (3) in the first place? What makes (3) true, however, is the fact that Brown is in Paris. This has nothing to do with Smith's belief that (3) there obviously is no logical connection between the fact that Brown is in France and Smith's believing that (3), except of course when Smith also has a separate evidence for believing that Brown is in France. But that is another story.

Again, either of the two counter-examples amounts to a contingency. It, therefore, fails to logically negate the traditional definition of knowledge. What we demand from genuine counter-examples is the cogency to completely rule out any position to take knowledge as a kind of "justified true belief." It must be able to show an instance where X's justified belief that p leads to a contradiction or an absurdity. A truly opposite alternative conception of knowledge should not just be another contingent formulation that does not logically rule out or completely negate the traditional epistemological construct.

## II

One of the justificationist proposals (Clark, 1963:46) to elude Gettier's counter-examples involves the addition of a "good grounds" clause. Hence, the traditional definition of knowledge comes

X knows p IFF:

- (i) p is true
- (ii) X believes that p
- (iii) X is justified in believing that p, and
- (iv) it is on good grounds that X believes that p.

In this regard, Clark (1963:46) suggests that the good grounds for X's belief for p must be true and it, too, must be justified. But what if X believes on good grounds, say on his

friend's account but his friend, despite being believed by X to be the epitome of honest and reliability, is wildly guessing or simply speculating at one case? Certainly, his friends' wild surmise or speculation can in no way induce X with "knowledge," (Sounders and Champawat, 1964: 8-9).

One, however, can argue that, in the first place, X's basis for believing that p is not at all reliable and therefore not "on good grounds," i.e., his friend, however righteous, is not infallible but at times makes wild guesses and commits mistakes.

If we have simply failed to show that knowledge does not indeed involve justified belief, will we be able to reach grounds in trying to make our assertions rationally defensible and our knowledge claims fully justified? Will our justification ever be truly conclusive? There simply is no guarantee; complete justification still appears to be an impossibility. Everything now seems to amount to faith, to redound to theology of which philosophy is handmaiden.

To further argue the case, if we grant that a knowledge claim eventually reaches the "bedrock" of justificatory discourse, it implies reaching out the most fundamental or basic statements of all cognitive assertions. Suppose that the regress is not infinite and that ultimately one is able to arrive at a relatively coherent or conclusive account of the justifiedness of "X knows that p." The chain of beliefs on which p depends has to rest on some basic belief or beliefs. These basic beliefs or justificatory statements, in turn, confer justification on the rest of the beliefs in the chain but apparently need no justification conferred on themselves, or, if ever they do, they justify themselves *a priori*. This contention cannot, however, be defended without believing in some Absolute Essence, in some kind of Aristotelian Prime, or Unmoved, Mover. The basic statements are able to confer justification to all our knowledge claims but they themselves are not justified or justifiable; they are the Ultimate Justification, the Unmoved Mover, which may or may not cause motion to itself and defies every Physics of Motion. Again, this is theology.

### III

#### Epilogue

This paper has thus far tried to show some inadequacies and curious aspects of Gettier's counter-examples to the traditional conception of knowledge vis-a-vis certain revisions or some recent ad hoc explication of knowledge as "justified true belief." Given the strong polemics against the old guards of epistemology, I suppose, what seems to pervade now in our quest for rationality is somekind of an "epistemic abyss" before which we stand seemingly undecided whether we dare jump into it and hope that we will make it to the touchdown, when most, if not all, epistemological questions are resolved without importing

any justificationist assumptions, or try to go back to our knowledge tradition and learn something from it.

This resistance before the "epistemological abyss," moreover, may be rooted in the fear of overthrowing the dyad of knowledge justification and rationality. For we have always equated rationalist with justificationism. What we consider justified is rational. Its converse, however, is rather suspect. What may be rational is not necessarily justified. The best knowledge that we have, namely, Science, is not "justified"; science is even largely not a "justified true belief" and hardly do we call it "irrational." Many scientific inventions and discoveries popped out of sheer guesswork. The discovery of the Benzene Ring, for instance, was made possible through a comatose sleep of Friedrich Kekule.

What is queer about denying knowledge as "justified true belief" seems to be this. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, it is not possible for one to say, "I know but I don't believe it" or, in the light of the question of justification, "I know it but I don't have any basis for it; I just know it!" What seems apparent, however, is that where knowledge or rationality applies, belief or disbelief does not. Beliefs are illusory imports traditional epistemologists confer on knowledge but which only discombolate the question. The issue of knowledge and rationality must, therefore, be freed from the "pyings" about beliefs.

But, of course, one may still raise questions. (In philosophy, we suppose, questions are more important than answers. And we are back practically to the same queries.) If our knowledge does not involve any justification whatsoever, on what basis or process can we make knowledge claim? (Is knowledge a matter of social convention alone?) Is there no more distinction of what we purport to know from conjectures, knowledge from mere opinion? Can there be such a thing as rational conjecture? If we do not justify our truth claims, how can we possibly rationalize our discourse of truth without giving any warrant to our cognitive assertions? Is knowledge a structure up there hanging in the air without essential foundations? Or, in the first place, is it a cognitive structure? ... **Who knows?**

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