6-29-2012

Reliabilism: A Response to the Gettier Problem

Jennifer Geffner

Reliabilism: A Response to the Gettier Problem

Jennifer Geffner '09

PHIL 335

Edmund Gettier, author of Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?, *poses a problem to the contemporary epistemologist: he objects that knowledge is not justified true belief. His problem has left philosophers either to develop further criteria for knowledge or to defend the traditional definition of knowledge—justified true belief.*

Alvin Goldman, author of *What is Justified Belief?*, responds to a certain type of Gettier case by providing a new account of justification. While Goldman's efforts are laudable, I argue that his theory of justification fails to answer the problem raised by Gettier.

Gettier reveals that justified, true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Even though a belief may be justified and true, Gettier seems to worry that the truth or justification of the agent's belief may be a matter of luck. For example, suppose that an agent is driving a Ford through a town filled with barn-like structures. The agent stops the car in front of what appears to be a barn and forms the belief that there is a barn in the town. This belief seems justified because it was caused by the agent's perception. The town that the agent is in, however, is actually one filled with barn facades. Ironically, the agent's belief is true because the agent stopped in front of the only real, three-dimensional barn in the town when he formed his belief. Because the agent holds a true, justified belief, the agent seems to know that there is a barn in the town. Gettier, however, argues that the agent's true, justified belief is not knowledge because it is coincidental that his belief is

justified and true.[1] Since the truth of the agent's belief may be disconnected from its justification, Gettier claims that knowledge requires something more.

Goldman tries to solve one of the problems posed by Gettier through reliabilism: the theory that an agent's belief is justified if it was caused by a cognitive process that tends to produce true beliefs.[2] For example, perception generally produces true beliefs and thus is a reliable mechanism that can justify an agent's belief. Reliabilism is an externalist theory of justification because the facts about a process's reliability are not available to the agent's immediate consciousness. Consequently, for a belief to be justified, Goldman claims that the agent need not know the reliability of the process that caused his belief.[3] Rather, Goldman claims that a belief is sufficiently justified if it was caused by a reliable process. Because justification is a result of a process that produces beliefs that tend to be true,

---

[1] Edmund, Gettier. *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Setup and Ernest Sosa, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 126

[2] Alvin, Goldman. *What is Justified Belief*. In *Reading Epistemology*, ed. Sven Bernecker, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 33

[3] Goldman, 32

Goldman seems to claim that the justification of an agent's true belief is not a result of luck.

Critics object that reliabilism is not sufficient for justification. Reliable processes such as sensory experiences may lead an agent to draw a false conclusion. For example, suppose that an agent is unaware that he is driving through a town filled with fake barns. The agent stops before one of the barn facades and forms the belief that there is a barn before him. According to reliablism, the agent is justified in his belief because it was formed through a reliable mechanism, perception. Even though the agent's belief was caused by a reliable mechanism, the agent's belief is not true. Because an agent may draw false conclusions from a process that tends to produce true beliefs, it does not appear as though reliabilism sufficiently justifies one's beliefs.

Goldman could deny that this counter-example does not reveal that reliabilism is insufficient for justification. Goldman might claim that the agent's belief may be justified by a reliable mechanism, but false. Reliability, according to Goldman, is conditional; he writes, "Justifiedness seems to be a function of how a cognizer deals with his environmental input […] that registers and transforms the stimulation that reaches him."[4] If special circumstances obtain, then Goldman claims that reliable causal processes may generate false beliefs.[5] For instance, in the prior example, the agent formed his belief through a reliable process, perception, but the barn facades rendered the agent's inputs false. Because a function's outputs are dependant on its inputs, the agent may generate a false belief if his inputs are limited. Even so, the process is still reliable because of how it transforms inputs into outputs.

Or, Goldman might claim that the agent did not make full use of other available processes.[6] If the agent had walked around the barn, for example, he would have discovered that the barn was a fake. It is unclear, however, whether Goldman is willing to make this claim. Goldman writes, "It seems implausible to say that all 'available' processes ought to be used, at least if we include such processes as gathering new evidence."[7] If the agent were to make full use of other available process, then it seems that the agent would need to engage in a never-ending process to be justified. While Goldman might not want to embrace these implications, in making this claim or the latter, Goldman repairs his argument that reliabilism is sufficient for justification.

However, critics claim that the agent may lack knowledge even if the mechanism that caused the agent's belief is operating under normal conditions and the agent's belief is true. To elucidate critics' objection, let us apply reliabilism to the initial Gettier case presented. Assuming the logic of reliabilism, the agent's belief that there is a barn in the town seems justified because it was caused by reliable processes. Given that the agent's belief is reliably justified and true, it seems that the agent knows that there is a barn in the town. However, even with reliabilism, the connection between the truth and justification of the agent's belief is a result of luck. Consequently, reliabilism does not seem to provide an account of justification that can solve this type of Gettier case.

---

[4] Goldman, 36
[5] Goldman, 37

[6] Goldman, 40
[7] ibid.

Goldman could admit that reliabilism permits the agent has knowledge in these Gettier scenarios. In the prior example, Goldman might claim that the agent knows that there is a barn in the town because the agent's belief is true and was caused by a reliable process. From the reliabilist's perspective, it does not appear as though this knowledge is a result of luck. Rather, according to the reliabilist, the agent has knowledge because of the connection between the truth of the agent's belief and the reasons the agent has for his belief. If Goldman were to claim that the agent does not have knowledge, then he cedes to the internalist who believes that justification is a result of what the agent can become aware of through reflection.[8]

Goldman's intuition clashes with that of his critics. If the reliabilist claims that the agent has knowledge in this type of Gettier case, then critics would respond that reliabilism does not require the right causal connection between the agent's belief and its justification. Had the agent stopped at any other barn, for example, the agent would not have been justified in his belief. Because reliabilism permits epistemic luck to account for knowledge, critics assert that there is still a disconnect between the truth and justification of an agent's belief. Therefore, critics conclude that Goldman's account of justification cannot solve this certain type of Gettier problem.

Even though a clash of intuitions has resulted, I conclude that Goldman's account of justification fails to solve the problem posed by Gettier: he objects that true, justified belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Goldman provides a theory of justification that causally links justification and truth because of its requisite for the agent's belief to be caused by a process that is likely to produce true beliefs. Reliabilism offers an attractive account of justification because justification requires a causal link between justification and truth. Even so, Goldman's account of justification does not seem to provide a link that is strong enough to evade the Gettier problem. In certain Gettier type cases, it is questionable whether the agent has knowledge because he is properly justified or if he holds knowledge by accident. I argue that the contemporary epistemologist must abstract from the uncertain and not award the agent knowledge if his knowledge may be a result of luck. Rather, the agent should only be awarded knowledge if it is certain that he is properly justified in holding a true belief. Because reliabilism does not provide a strong causal link between truth and justification when it is applied to certain types of Gettier cases, I argue that reliabilism fails to answer the problem raised by Gettier.

---

[8] Sven Bernecker. *Reading Epistemology*. (Malden, Blackwell), 27

Works Cited

Bernecker, Sven. *Reading Epistemology*. Malden: Blackwell, 2006

Gettier, Edmund. *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Setup and Ernest Sosa, 125-126. Malden: Blackwell, 2006

Goldman, Alvin. *What is Justified Belief?*. In *Reading Epistemology*, edited by Sven Bernecker, 31-40. Malden: Blackwell, 2006