THE INCONSISTENCY OF GETTIER'S CASES

M. PERRICK

In his famous paper *"Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"* (Analysis Vol. 23, 1963, pp. 121–3) Gettier denies that justified true belief is a *sufficient* condition for knowledge. In his paper, Gettier presents two cases which are supposed to be examples of justified true belief but not of knowledge, as the reasons why the propositions at issue are true, and why they are believed to be true, strongly diverge.

In the first part of this paper, I will show that in both cases Gettier adduces against the view that knowledge is justified true belief, it is possible to deduce an *alternative* conclusion, which fulfils the following conditions:
a) Both Gettier's conclusion and the alternative one are equally justified.
b) Both conclusions can be true together.
c) Notwithstanding a) and b), Gettier's conclusion and the alternative one should be considered as *incompatible* with each other, *if* Gettier's argument were correct.

Needless to say that I will conclude that Gettier's cases are inconsistent. In the second part of my paper, I will try to assess, in a more speculative vein, what went wrong in Gettier's argument.

1

In the first part of this paper, I will strictly and emphatically limit myself to Gettier's premises and assumptions (points), which I will take for granted. Before proposing his two cases, Gettier makes two points, which are fundamental assumptions in his argument.

"First, in that sense of "justified" in which S's being justified in believing P is a necessary condition of S's knowing that P, it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false. Secondly, for any proposition P, if S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in

believing Q". (Gettier 1.c. p. 121).

In Gettier's Case I, Smith and Jones have applied for the same job, and Smith has strong evidence for the following proposition:

(1) Jones is the man who will get the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

Proposition (1) entails:

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

As Smith is justified in believing proposition (1), it can be deduced, by virtue of Gettier's second point, that Smith is also justified in believing (2). But how are we to interpret Smith's being justified in believing (2)? Due to the central part the notion of (justified) belief plays in the argument, there seems to be a fundamental ambiguity involved in saying that Smith is justified in believing (2). Is there a particular man concerning whom Smith has a justified belief, or is Smith justified in believing that some man...?

Making use of existential generalisation can expose the ambiguity lurking here more clearly. Consider the following propositions (where "Bs" stands for: "S is justified in believing that"):

(2a) (Ex) (Bs x will get the job and x has ten coins in his pocket).

(2b) Bs ((Ex) x will get the job and x has ten coins in his pocket).

Given that Smith is justified in believing (1), the propositions (2a) and (2b) can both be deduced by virtue of Gettier's second point, although there is a vast difference between them. (The difference is like the one in Quine's famous example between spotting a suspect and merely believing that there are spies).

However, considering Smith's evidence for (1) —the president of the company told Smith that Jones will get the job, and, also, Smith just counted the coins in Jones's pocket— makes it quite clear that the "x" in (2a) can *only* refer to Jones.

In Gettier's Case I, it is further assumed (imagined) that (1) is false but that (2) is true. Although (1) is false, Smith's belief in (1) is still justified (by virtue of Gettier's first point), and, therefore, (2a) and (2b) still hold. The question is whether (2a) and (2b) are true. As we saw before, (2a) and (2b) both express the fact that Smith is justified in believing (2). To prevent possible misunderstandings, when we ask whether, for instance, (2b) is true, we don't ask whether it is the case that Smith has a justified belief, but: is it true what Smith is justified to believe?

We have now all of the following:

1) The falseness of (1);
2) As the variable "x" in (2a) can only refer to Jones, *given* that (1) is false, (2a) cannot be true;
3) On the other hand, the falseness of (1) is compatible with (2b) being true, if —as Gettier has to assume, and as is apparent from (2) being true— the variable "x" in (2b) does not necessarily refer to Jones.

From the conjunction of 1), 2), and 3), we can deduce a contradiction. On the one hand, we have to attribute to Smith both (2a) and (2b), which are equally justified, as both are validly deduced from Smith's justified belief in (1). On the other hand, as (1) is false (2a) must be false, and only the truth of (2b) is compatible with the falseness of (1). Gettier seems to have overlooked the deducibility of (2a), or, at least, the problem (2a) causes if it is assumed that (1) is false. Gettier argues, of course, for the truth of (2b), his first case against knowledge as justified true belief. Nevertheless, if Gettier's argument were right, it would enable us to attribute to Smith both (2a) and (2b), which are equally justified, and, considered separately, quite compatible with each other, but which *at the same time* —given the falseness of (1)— should be considered as *incompatible* with each other.

In Gettier's Case II, Smith is justified in believing proposition (3):
(3) Jones owns a Ford.
   Smith has another friend, Brown, of whose whereabouts he is totally ignorant. Smith constructs the following propositions:
(4) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston;
(5) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Brest-Litovsk;
(6a) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.
   Each of these propositions is entailed by (3). Moreover, as Smith is justified in believing (3), we can deduce, by virtue of Gettier's second point, that Smith is also justified in believing (4), (5), and (6a).
   Consider now the following proposition:
(6b) Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is not in Barcelona.
   Clearly, (6b) is entailed by (3). Further, from Smith's being justified in believing (3), we can deduce —again by virtue of Gettier's second point— that Smith is also justified in believing (6b). Since the propositions (4), (5), (6a), and (6b) can all be true together, nothing tells against deducing (6b) as well.
   It is further assumed (imagined), however, that (3) is false and that Brown actually is in Barcelona. It follows that (6a) is true and that (6b) is false. Notwithstanding this, however, Smith is still justified in believing both (6a) and (6b), as Smith's belief in (3) is still justified (by virtue of Gettier's first point). But, *given* that (3) is false and that (3) is the first disjunct of both

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(6a) and (6b), it follows that (6a) and (6b) are contradictories of each other.*
Thus, once again, we have to attribute to Smith two beliefs, which are equally
justified, but incompatible with each other.

Considering the above findings, I conclude that Gettier's cases against the
definition of knowledge as justified true belief are inconsistent, and should
therefore be rejected.

2

If my criticism of Gettier's cases is justified, I must now try to answer the
question what went wrong in Gettier's argument.

Gettier's first point is, I think, quite plausible, and seems unassailable.
His second point is clearly intended to prevent —in all instances to be met
with— the possible, negative, consequences of the opacity inherent in belief
contexts. Even if this second point is insufficient to prevent the referential
opacity as illustrated by (2a) and (2b) in Case I, still it is far from evident
how this second point, whether or not combined with the first one, would
lead to contradictory consequences. For, as we saw, (2a) and (2b) —and the
same holds for (6a) and (6b)— are, considered separately, quite compatible
with each other.

Assuming that Gettier's two points are acceptable, what remain to be con-
sidered are the premises from which Gettier deduces his two counterexam-
ples against knowledge as justified true belief.

These counterexamples purport to show, as we saw, that the traditional
conception of knowledge is insufficient (therefore wrong), since the reasons
why the propositions at issue are true, and why they are justified (justifiably
believed), diverge.

More or less as a *casual* remark Gettier introduces a third point, to wit,
the *actually* justified belief in the falseness of the two premises from which
his two counterexamples are derived. This is quite misleading, for this third
point is not implied by his first one, which only states that "...it is *possible*
for a person to be justified in believing a proposition that is in fact false".
(Gettier 1.c. p. 121; italics added). Moreover, this third point is a conditio
sine qua non for the construction of Gettier's counterexamples. It is easy to
see why. As illustrated by (2b) and (6a), true propositions can be validly de-
duced (and, therefore, be justifiably believed) from false premises. Since the

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* This conclusion is valid independently of the question of whether or not it is assumed
that Boston, Barcelona, and Brest-Litovsk are *all* the possible whereabouts of Brown's. I
remark this in order to make clear that the acceptance of (6b) is independent of the problem
of "logical omniscience" and of endeavours —with an appeal to this problem— to obstruct
the construction of Gettier-type cases.

truth of the deduced propositions cannot be derived from the false premises, the reasons why the deduced propositions are true and why they are justifiably believed must differ. On the other hand —since logical deduction is a truth preserving operation— if we *validly* deduce propositions from *true* premises, we establish in one single step that the deduced propositions are true and that they are justifiably believed. In this case, then, there is no room for divergence between being true and being justifiably believed.

In order to drive a wedge between the truth and the being justified of a proposition, Gettier has to assume what we have called his third point, which is essential to his argument. Without this third point, Gettier's cases would not be Gettier-cases.

Curiously, Gettier's assumption that Smith is actually justified in believing propositions that are factually false, is not only a conditio sine qua non for the construction of Gettier's supposed counterexamples; this very assumption enabled us, in the first part of this paper, to show that Gettier's cases are inconsistent. What is fatal to Gettier's argument is precisely the combination of his third point with his second one (that proved to be too liberal, not restrictive enough).

I guess that Gettier's argument would have been much less surprising had he explicitly stated his third point. It is one thing to reckon with the possibility that some propositions, belonging to the body of our supposed knowledge, are false; it is quite another thing to speak of knowledge in a case —even if only to discredit the case— where the assumption of the actually justified belief in the falseness of a proposition is a conditio sine qua non for the case at issue.

However this may be, Gettier's cases against the traditional view that knowledge is justified true belief are inconsistent, and this inconsistency derives only from his own premises and assumptions.