

These are the slides for a talk I gave to the Gerrard's Cross Philosophy Group, August 2020

How might Virtue Epistemology handle Gettier cases?

Part I: Background to an account of Knowledge as Justified True Belief

On the face of it, if one has a belief that is true, then one would seem to know something.

I say: "Samantha is on holiday in Spain".

You say: "True, she told me she was going."

I have knowledge that Samantha is on holiday in Spain.

Two conditions for knowledge:

I believe claim x. (If I don't believe it I can't know it)

x is true. (If x is not true, I can't know it)

Knowledge is True Belief.

Knowledge as True Belief: problems

The account of knowledge as true belief found its challenge in Plato's *Meno*, in which it is argued that true belief cannot be knowledge because it is 'untethered', not grounded sufficiently to be stable. The metaphor for the stability of knowledge is that of the statues of Daedalus, a sculptor who made such life-like statues that it was thought that if they were not nailed down they might walk away.

Tethered true belief is true belief shown to be stable, enduring, by its being properly justified. It cannot just 'walk away', as in change from true to false.

Why is True Belief insufficient for knowledge?

Arrived at by luck:

Arrived at by an undisclosed lack of knowledge

Belief in an unproven source of knowledge: horoscopes, ouija boards, numerology, tarot cards

Wishful thinking that something is the case

Arguing for a view because it contradicts someone else's view

Not only are lucky guesses unstable, they are viewed as not formed in a way that might be thought worthy of knowledge: Knowledge is viewed as more valuable than merely True Belief.

Can luck ever be a basis for knowledge?

Knowledge is True Belief made stable by proper justification:

What kinds of things justify knowledge?

Perception, memory, analysis, testimony, regularities of experience

Part II: Problems raised for an account of knowledge as Justified True Belief by Gettier cases

Edmund Gettier (1963) argued that even a case of justified true belief might not be knowledge. Here is one of Gettier's own cases:

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. Suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following proposition: (1) Jones will get the job, and (2) the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Smith's evidence for (1) is that the president of the company assured him that Jones would be selected and he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (1) entails (2) The person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (1) to (2), and accepts (2) on the grounds of (1), for which he has strong evidence as (1) is justified by testimony from a relevant authority.

But imagine 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 (2) is true, though proposition (1), from which Smith inferred (2), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (2) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (2) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (2) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not *know* that (2) is true; for (2) is true in virtue of the number of coins in *Smith's* pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in his pocket, and bases his belief in (2) on a count of the coins in *Jones's* pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the person who will get the job.

Here's another:

John comes home from shopping for dinner and sees that his wife Mary is at home, asleep in a chair, not still at her office. Knowing that she is home he makes dinner, brings it into the dining room and calls her name. Mary comes into the dining room and joins him for their evening meal.

Did John know that Mary was home? It seems on the face of it that he did. He saw her in the chair. However:

The person in the chair was Anne, Mary's sister, waiting patiently for Mary to finish her work call and come out of her study. When John called for Mary she came out of the study.

He had not, in fact, known she was home.

Bad luck: it was Anne, not Mary in the chair.

Good luck: Mary was home, in her study.

This is not considered to be a case of knowledge because John's judgement was based on the false assumption that the person in the chair was Mary. He did not know Mary was home, but was lucky because his belief turned out to be true.

How might we respond then to Gettier cases?





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My, that's a fine looking barn
over there!

Some ways of responding to Gettier cases

For the belief to be knowledge the belief must arise from true assumptions justified by reliable or responsible means of justification: for any method of justifying a belief, there cannot be any faults with the method or the agent's application of it. If justification is perceptual, perception must be veridical, if it is testimonial, it cannot be from a dishonest or ignorant source, if it is analytical, all steps in the analysis must be based on true foundations, etc. However, in addition to all this, in light of Gettier cases, there can be no false assumptions, implicit or explicit, on which the belief is grounded. Mere luck must be ruled out.

Duncan Pritchard has referred to the wide range of additional conditions for knowledge as *messy, unattractive, gerrymandering*, undermining the possibility for a unified conception of knowledge and setting the bar too high. We could end up like sceptics unable to be certain that we have knowledge of anything.

Part III: Background to Virtue Epistemology with reference to Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Two main theories of how moral judgements should be made:

Kantian deontology: reason's logic gives us an objective criterion for moral action if we act according to the moral law. We do this by applying Kant's Categorical Imperatives, expressing the idea that what we do must be universalisable as an action for all human beings; with all human beings treated as ends in themselves in the kingdom of ends (an appeal to the equality and autonomy of all human beings). How we *feel* about a moral choice is not relevant for determining moral actions: these can only be determined through application of the objectively holding moral law.

Utilitarianism: we ought to refer to a moral calculus determining the quantity of happiness an action provides in order to guide moral action. (Mill's Utilitarianism diverges from this calculus, but that's another story). The greatest happiness for the greatest number (The Greatest Happiness Principle) determines the moral worth of an action.

Both accounts have been criticised for leaving out the agent.

How Virtue Ethics differs from these:

The moral worth of an action is determined by the moral character or virtuousness of the agent.

This character is shaped by experience, self-reflection, and education. Virtue is not an all or nothing property, but is a combination of engaging capacities such as self reflection, self critique, with reference to one's moral training, as well possessing traits such as honesty, humility, respect for life and an interest in human flourishing.

The key point for us is that virtue ethics is grounded in the character of the agent, not in an external measure of what any agent would do. Aristotle's emphasis on the agent being *sensitive* to the specific conditions for an action and *acting appropriately* in those conditions is central. Each moral action will be, in some sense, unique, reflecting the particular conditions of the particular moral demand.

Virtue Epistemology

Substitute Epistemology for Ethics and you get this picture:

A knowing agent is one who has virtuous capacities, i.e. excellent perception, memory and analytical abilities. She will also have virtuous character traits such as open mindedness, humility and interest in pursuing the truth. A knower with virtuous capacities and traits recognises the demands of a particular situation and responds appropriately. Knowledge is, on this account, true belief justified through applying the virtuous capacities and traits required for justifying a belief as knowledge.

As in the ethical model, being a virtuous knower involves ongoing self-reflection, self-correction and sensitivity to the requirements of each situation.

Virtuous capacities and traits: is this enough?

Virtue Epistemologists emphasise the centrality of the knower as *active in the pursuit of knowledge*, rather than simply being subjected to belief formed in the right way. A knower gains credit for her accomplishment for she has put effort into arriving at what she knows.

But is this enough?

Jason Baehr* argues that virtue epistemology needs to include the character trait of *sophia*, or *wisdom*, in order to meet the demands of knowing in a virtuous way. One key reason he argues for *sophia* as an intellectual virtue in the pursuit of knowledge is that with *sophia* a knower aims at *significant knowledge*, not pointless knowledge, and at deep not superficial *understanding*. It seems undoubtedly true that *sophia*, so understood, definitely adds to the virtue epistemologist's tool box.

*https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/phil_fac/15/

Sophia and eudaemonic appreciation

However, since much of what we aim to know is not a matter of deep first principles, but is still significant to us for our daily lives, my suggestion is that we include the virtue of aiming for *human flourishing*, or a *eudaemonic appreciation* of the value of knowing something.

What we need to know may not be metaphysically important, or particularly deep. But it matters for our well being that our friend makes his train home on time, or that we are booking a holiday in Athens, Greece, not Athens, Georgia.

Eudaemonic appreciation: some details

Eudaemonic appreciation would rule out worrying about forming knowledge about things that do not matter to us, as would *sophia*, but it would also include forming knowledge in ways that reflect the *eudemonic role* such knowledge plays in our lives.

I need to know when my friend's train leaves, but perhaps also what seat he will have and what services are available to him. I need *particular knowledge* about his journey, not just facts about the timetable, so I will investigate all of this to the point where I am satisfied I know the conditions of his travel.

Eudaemonic appreciation includes recognition of the holistic conditions within which any claim to knowledge fits; it includes understanding the levels of investigation required to secure knowledge that is important: additional work is required when something more is at stake, less work is required when less is at stake.

Part IV: How Virtue Epistemology might handle Gettier cases

If we include *eudaemonic appreciation* to our list of virtuous traits, how might virtue epistemology handle Gettier cases? (these are tentative first steps in how such cases might be handled)

Stopped clock: if it mattered it would be reasonable to check it in a few minutes and then check another source as well until one is satisfied. True belief would become (defeasible) knowledge.

Smith and Jones: if Smith gets the job he will be amused at the change of referent for the bearer of 10 coins. True belief would be understood as not an instance of knowledge.

Fake barn country: If the appreciation of the barn is related to its appearance, then it is still true even if the barn might have been a fake. So it is knowledge of the form or appearance of the barn. If the appreciation of the barn was related to using it then further investigation of its internal properties would be needed for knowledge. The nature of the interest in the barn guides the investigation of its properties before knowledge is established.

John, Mary and Anne: If John saw his wife in the chair and had thought she was in the office, he might have greeted her with surprise and pleasure, thus finding out that it was Anne.