



Knowledge and the Gettier Problem

Edmund Gettier's 1963 verdict about what knowledge is not has become an item of philosophical orthodoxy, accepted by philosophers as a genuine epistemological result. It assures us that – contrary to what Plato and later philosophers have thought – knowledge is not merely a true belief well supported by epistemic justification. But that orthodoxy has generated the Gettier problem – epistemology's continuing struggle to understand how to accommodate Gettier's apparent result within an improved conception of knowledge. In this book Stephen Hetherington argues that none of epistemology's standard attempts to solve that problem have succeeded: he shows how subtle yet fundamental mistakes – regarding explication, methodology, properties, modality, and fallibility – have permeated those responses to Gettier's challenge. His fresh and original book outlines a new way of solving the problem, and an improved grasp of Gettier's challenge and its significance is the result. In a sense, Plato can now embrace Gettier.

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*For Bill Lycan,
with gratitude for the excitement, energy, and
encouragement with which he introduced the
undergraduate me to the Gettier problem*

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Preface and Acknowledgements

What philosophers refer to as the *Gettier problem* – in honour of Edmund Gettier’s 1963 paper, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” – has been a pivotal part of analytic epistemology since ... well, 1963. In rough and general terms, the Gettier problem may be thought of as this combination:

1. An epistemological *datum*, presented by Gettier – possible cases of a belief being true and epistemically justified without being knowledge, with each such belief’s failure to be knowledge being due to some distinctive feature(s) of the associated case (call this the *Gettier Datum*);
2. An epistemological *moral*, articulated by Gettier on the basis of that datum in (1) – this moral being that describing a belief as true and epistemically justified is not enough for describing it as knowledge (call this the *Gettier Moral*); and
3. An epistemological *history*, inspired by Gettier – of competing attempts by philosophers to understand more fully and precisely that datum in (1) and thereby that moral in (2) (call this the *Gettier History*).

Given how clearly true (say most epistemologists) is that moral described in (2), based as it is (they also say) on the unassailable datum in (1), many epistemologists have hungered to know *how* that moral is true, given that datum. And so the history in (3) has arisen.

But that history has included widespread frustration: epistemologists as a group, it seems, remain as far as they have ever been from agreeing on why the Gettier Moral is true. Their confidence in the Gettier Datum – and thereby in the Gettier Moral – persists. They are still optimistic, too, that the main kinds of epistemological theories that have been proposed as ways of understanding the Gettier Moral are at least worthy of being discussed as potential explications of that moral. Correlatively, a marketplace of Gettier-inspired theories of knowledge

has been established, amounting to an epistemological research program featuring an array of officially respectable kinds of theories. Are new theories also permitted within that marketplace? Of course they are (we will be assured) – *so long as* the Gettier Datum and the Gettier Moral stay in place, ever accepted, at the centre of the resulting debates. This has long been the usual epistemological practice, at any rate. The outcome has been a mass of theories which are set against each other by their owners – with the question having rarely been raised of why none of those theories has been seen clearly to trump the others. (“It’s philosophy. Disagreements are inevitable between strongly held and prima facie tempting theories.” Shoulders are shrugged.)

Nevertheless, that question *was* raised to wide acclaim in 2000 when Timothy Williamson (in chapter 1 of *Knowledge and Its Limits*) asked whether the lack of any obvious progress towards resolving the inconclusiveness of the Gettier History might reflect our simply being unable to understand the nature of knowledge – more precisely, our being unable to understand knowledge in a particular way, the way in which epistemologists had routinely been trying to explain or clarify the Gettier Moral after accepting the Gettier Datum. And what way was that? The form of understanding in question would involve our reaching a conceptual *analysis* of knowledge, attaining a correlative *definition* of knowledge – most probably one that would describe knowledge as a composite of truth, belief, epistemic justification (such as good evidence), and something further. Williamson famously urged us to relinquish the search for any such analysis or definition of knowledge. Even so, he did not abandon (what I am calling) the Gettier Datum or the Gettier Moral.

Williamson’s approach has received much attention (e.g. Greenough and Pritchard 2009), and my aim in this book is not to enter into that debate over the rights and wrongs of his reaction to Gettier. I will develop an alternative line of inquiry. Like Williamson, I will be commenting directly upon the Gettier History. But I will do this quite differently to how it has been done by him and by those who endorse his “knowledge first” approach to conceptual questions about knowledge.

First, I will describe an independent reason why the Gettier History has failed – and indeed why it will continue to fail unless it changes radically in how it tries – to understand the Gettier Datum. (Moreover, the independent reason I will describe is applicable even if we regard

those theories which have so far been part of the Gettier History as seeking only partial and non-definitional explication or understanding of the Gettier Datum.) I will identify a fatal and fundamental presumption that has unwittingly been shared by those various sorts of epistemological theories that have collectively constituted the Gettier History.

Second, I will show how we can accommodate the Gettier Datum without having to accept the Gettier Moral – once we set aside that fatal fundamental presumption. (It is a presumption about the role of the *fallibility* that was highlighted in the thought experiments that were conducted by Gettier when he generated that Datum. I will describe an approach that is similar in spirit but that – by being centred *not quite* on that sort of fallibility – is different *enough*.) In this way, I will be proposing an improved understanding of the significance of the Gettier Datum for how we should conceive of knowledge – and, consequently, a fresh path along which any future Gettier History might usefully travel.

So, I am not at odds with Williamson's advocating that we discontinue seeking a conceptual analysis or definition of knowledge. Nonetheless, we will find that knowledge *can* still be understood – even if maybe not conceptually analysed – as always being a kind of epistemically justified true belief. More importantly, we will find that this is so *even if we accept the Gettier Datum*. That is, even if the Gettier Datum is accepted, we are not then obliged to accept the Gettier Moral. There remains a way of interpreting knowledge, even so, as always being a kind of epistemically justified true belief. Hence, the Gettier Moral might not be true.

In this respect, therefore, I hope to show that post-1963 epistemology has moved (and, if it does not discard the fatal fundamental presumption that I will be identifying, it will continue to move) too speedily in its various standard interpretations of the Gettier Datum – interpretations that have been constitutive of the Gettier History between 1963 and now. This book aims first to *slow down* that kind of post-1963 epistemology – and, second, to render more realistic the idea of our *returning* in part to a simpler time, a pre-1963 epistemology of knowledge.

It has been invigorating for many of us to feel that, thanks to the Gettier Datum, we have in front of us a definitely known epistemological truth (the Gettier Moral) – one that can help us to

test with increased assurance any proposed theories of knowledge that might arise as we reflect more generally upon the nature of knowledge. But that confidence, that optimism, should be tempered, I will be arguing. The sobering news, if this book is correct, is that what epistemologists have long assumed to be a manifest instance of epistemological progress – an easily graspable epistemological moral, thanks to Gettier – has not been *quite* the programmatically definitive step forward that they have believed it to be.

Preliminary versions of some of this book's arguments were presented to several very helpful audiences – the Australasian Association of Philosophy's Annual Conference (twice), the University of Sydney, Charles Sturt University, Fordham University, Northwestern University, University of Georgia, Lingnan University, University of Edinburgh, the UK Joint Session (the Mind Association and the Aristotelian Society), and the University of New South Wales (my own university). Conversations with Ken Gemes, Paul Snowdon, and Markos Valaris were invaluable. Brent Madison read an early draft of the manuscript, raising many excellent questions and issues. I also appreciate the care and insightfulness of the two anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press, along with the sensitive editorial support of Hilary Gaskin. Most of Section 3.8 comes from my "Abnormality and Gettier Situations: An Explanatory Proposal," *Ratio* 24 (2011), 176–91. I appreciate the permission, from the *Ratio* editor and Wiley Blackwell, to reprint that material. Section 5.4 is adapted, with kind permission, from my "The Significance of Fallibilism within Gettier's Challenge: A Case Study," *Philosophia* 40 (2012), 539–47. And Chapter 7 is adapted, with permission, for which I am grateful, from my "A Fallibilist and Wholly Internalist Solution to the Gettier Problem," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001), 127–36.