The Gettier Problem

When philosophers try to understand the nature of knowledge, they arguably have to confront the Gettier Problem. This problem, set out in Edmund Gettier’s famous paper of 1963, has possibly yet to be solved, and has challenged our best attempts to define what knowledge is. This volume offers an organised sequence of accessible and distinctive chapters explaining the history of debate surrounding Gettier’s challenge, and where that debate should take us next. The chapters describe and evaluate a wide range of ideas about knowledge that have been sparked by philosophical engagements with the Gettier problem, including such phenomena as fallibility, reasoning, evidence, reliability, truth-tracking, context, luck, intellectual virtue, wisdom, conceptual analysis, intuition, experimental philosophy, and explication. The result is an authoritative survey of fifty-plus years of epistemological research – along with provocative ideas for future research – into the nature of knowledge.

Stephen Hetherington is Professor of Philosophy at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His many publications in epistemology include Knowledge and the Gettier Problem (2016).
Classic Philosophical Arguments

Over the centuries, a number of individual arguments have formed a crucial part of philosophical enquiry. The volumes in this series examine these arguments, looking at the ramifications and applications which they have come to have, the challenges which they have encountered, and the ways in which they have stood the test of time.

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Preface

The Gettier problem is a classic – and continuing – moment within modern philosophy. It began with a punchy question – the title of Edmund Gettier’s 1963 paper, “Is justified true belief knowledge?” – and a snappy argument – Gettier’s – for a confronting answer. Gettier was asking whether knowledge is wholly definable as a justified true belief; his answer was a decisive “No.” In which case, epistemologists were left wondering – really wondering – about what knowledge is, if it is not what, according to Gettier, they had taken it to be.

Sparking this epistemological upheaval was no small achievement. To understand how much of an upheaval it was, remember that the initial characterization that philosophers ever offer of epistemology, such as to their introductory students, is that it is “theory of knowledge.” Epistemologists were therefore hit hard – very hard – by the thought of lacking an agreed definition of what knowledge is. What were they even theorizing about? So, it is hardly surprising that Gettier’s argument had the initial impact that it did.

Of course, his argument would not have continued making such an impact if epistemologists had swiftly and surely concurred on a reply to that argument – for instance, a reply decreeing what knowledge is, if not simply a justified true belief. But no such consensus arose – at the time, or soon after, or soon after that, or . . .

We are still waiting. We thereby face what soon became known as the Gettier problem.

And thus we have this book.

I am very grateful to Hilary Gaskin at Cambridge University Press for inviting me to edit the book, as well as for her subsequent advice and guidance. The Gettier problem is one of the topics that sparked my youthful epistemological instincts. And although I am no longer youthful, the Gettier problem remains with me. I hope that this book can help others to appreciate some of the philosophical complexity and richness that has created and sustained the problem. In surprisingly many respects, it has been a good problem for epistemology to have.