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Still on the Gettier Problem and Its Respondents

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to look at the nature and origin of the Gettier Problem, make an analysis of it, and consider some of the reactions and responses to it. The paper holds that the problem is genuine and that the various responses to it have not been able to discredit it nor has the problem been solved. An attempt to solve the problem is made in this paper.

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1. Traditional Conception of Knowledge

Philosophers then and now agree that there is a wide gap between knowledge and opinion. They also agree that knowledge is better than opinion because knowledge is more reliable than opinion. One major difference between opinion or belief and knowledge is, according to Ogundare (2004: 38) that, knowledge implies truth while opinion does not. That is, if one claims to know something, that claim must be true. It amounts to a contradiction for one to claim to know something but at the same time says that that knowledge claims not true. However, no contradiction is involved when one claim to have a belief and the belief or opinion turns out to be false.

If knowledge is difference from opinion or belief, then, what is knowledge? In other words, what does on mean when one claims to know? Knowledge was traditionally defined (and refined) as Justified True Belief. In Plato's works, Theatetus and Meno, there was a great deal of discussion of the concept of knowledge. In the Theatetus, the original definition of knowledge is True Belief plus logo. For one to know, by this definition, three conditions or standards must be met. What is claimed to be known must be true. One must have a belief that what he claims to know is true or the case. More importantly, he must have good reasons for having that claim. Hence, knowledge is traditionally defined as Justified True Belief. This can be demonstrated as follows:

I know that Nigeria is the University of Ibadan is the oldest University in Nigeria. Traditionally, for this to count or amount to knowledge, it must be true, or be the case that University of Ibadan and not the University of Nigeria, Nssuka, is the oldest University in Nigeria. If this condition is not met, I can only have an opinion or a belief, but certainly, not knowledge. Secondly, and more important than the first condition, I must believe that the University of Ibadan is the oldest University in Nigeria. If I claim to know that the University of Ibadan is the oldest University in Nigeria but I claim that I do not believe it that amounts to a contradiction. Thirdly, and most importantly, I must have good reasons for making that knowledge claim that the University of Ibadan is the oldest University in Nigeria. My good reasons should include relevant history books that relate with the history of education in Nigeria, Newspapers and Magazines, and goggling Universities in Nigeria and their years of establishment.

Plato rejects this definition of knowledge in the Theatetus. For instance, the third condition can be faulted. If, for instance, of the three sources I have as my justification, one or two of them give the same answer, and one or two of them give another answer, where do I go from here?

The rejection of this definition, notwithstanding, according to Kolawole (2000: 52) the whole world relied on it for centuries. The reason for this is partly because of want of better definition, but certainly, not for its adequacy. In the 20th century, however, a man called Edmund Gettier, revisited this epistemological problem and challenged this notion of knowledge. Gettier was born on December 15th, 1927 in Baltimore, Maryland. He attended Cornell University, then a lecture at the Wayne State University, Detroit. He was greatly influenced by notable philosophers like Max Black and Norman Malcolm. He was said to have been persuade to publish by his colleagues at the University. His only publication is the three-page but highly influential article, titled: Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? This article was published in the Analysis in 1963. From the title of the article, it becomes evident that Gettier is out to challenge the traditional conception of knowledge. He was also to criticize Roderick Chisholm and A. J. Ayer on their necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge. The starting point of Gettier is the reformulation of the traditional notion of knowledge. According to him, S knows P if and only if

P is True

S believes **P**

S is justified in believing that **P**

Gettier writes thus:

I shall begin by noting two points. First, in that sense of 'justified' 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.

Gettier presented two cases to show that it is possible for one to meet the three conditions set up by the traditional epistemologists, yet, that person may not still know. In the first case, two applicants; Smith and Jones applied for a job in a company. Before getting to the venue of the interview, Smith saw ten coins in Jones pocket. At the company, President told them that Jones will have the job. Smith then constructs a conjunctive statement thus:

D. Jones is the man that will have the job, and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

The first aspect of the statement is based on what the president of the company told them, while the second aspect is based on first-hand experience. Smith moves further to construct another statement thus:

E. The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

However, and unknown to Smith, he has ten coins in his pocket, and was invariably offered the job. The argument of Gettier is that E proposition is true but that it cannot be said that Smith knows because the statement was made with respect to Jones and not to Smith. As a matter of fact, E proposition is true by accident. With this example, Gettier demonstrates that there are cases where justified true belief may not count as knowledge.

Gettier presents the second case thus;

Jones has been seen on many occasions driving a Ford car. On some occasions, he has given Smith a ride. For these reasons, Smith constructs a proposition thus: F. Jones has a Ford car. It happens again that Smith has a friend called Brown. For a very long time, Smith has not heard any information about his friend, Brown. Smith now constructs three disjunctive statements, with the first disjunct remaining constant thus:

G. Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Boston.

H. Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona.

I. Either Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Brest-Litovsk.

It happens that Brown is in Barcelona but Jones does not own Ford, rather, he hires it. H remains true however simply because Brown is in Barcelona. This is because disjunctive statement is true if one of the disjuncts is true. Gettier contends that H is true simply by accident and so, does not constitute knowledge. With these two cases, Gettier demonstrates that Justified True Belief does not amount to knowledge. The fourth condition still needs to be sought in order to have knowledge. It is this search for the fourth condition that, according to Kolawole (2000: 52) constitutes what has been tagged the "Gettier Problem."

Attempts have been made to solve this problem or to fault Gettier's position and claim that Justified True Belief constitutes knowledge. We shall consider two of these attempts. First, we start with Ogundare's view. Ogundare's paper is titled "Epistemology" (2004: 35) Having criticized Michael Clark on the ground of infinite regress, he declares his intention thus:

I wish to provide an illustration to show that there could be cases where 'Justified True Belief' can be knowledge, and to comment on what this must mean for our understanding of the nature of knowledge.

According to him, S believes that: Y is not in School today. This statement was made based on the report of X who told S that Y has gone to Lagos. On getting to Lagos, Y called X on phone telling him of his safe arrival. Following this, X made the statement: Y's lecture will not hold. However, Y immediately received a call from his Vice-Chancellor, inviting him for an emergency meeting back in School. Y returned immediately, attended the meeting and still made it to the class and had the lecture. His conclusion is that, knowledge is sometimes circumstantial, because, according to him, the statement: Y's lecture will not hold was true up to the point Y returned from Lagos. The implications of this 'circumstantial' knowledge are too serious to epistemology if the author is right. But, is he? No. Even if Y has not returned to take his lecture, that will not make 'Y's lecture will not hold' to be true. This is because, the simple fact that a lecturer is not in school does not imply that his lecture will not hold. Those who are familiar with tertiary institutions know that, sometime, senior lecturers do call on the junior ones to hold forth for them in class whenever they are not chanced to be in class. The point being made here is that, the absence of a lecturer in school does not in any-way imply that his class will not hold. The Gettier Problem remains after Ogundare's attempt.

Another reaction or response to the Gettier Problem is from Lukasz Lozanski. He titles his article: 'The Gettier Problem No Longer a Problem.' Lukasz makes analyses of the Gettier's problem. Lukasz was interested in the conjunct the man who will get the job, and according to him, the man is not known, whether it refers to Jones or Smith. He then says:

Gettier has tried to use semantic obscurity to trick the reader into believing that justified true belief is not enough for knowledge. However, it can be seen that in this case, the 'knowledge' was either not justified or false, and thus never constitute knowledge in the first place.

As in the case of the first example given by Gettier, Lukasz argues that sufficient evidence was not provided by Smith that Jones owns a Ford car, so, there was no justification for that proposition. Lukasz then summarizes his attack on Gettier thus:

The problem of reference-muddling in example one and the inherent logical flaw in example two show that Gettier problems are not threat to 'knowledge as justified true belief'. The classical definition of knowledge as justified true belief doesn't have to be changed, and no extra premises have to be added.

Lukasz seems to have taken an important thing for granted in the second case of Gettier. What makes H proposition true is not because Jones owns a Ford, rather, it is because Brown lives in Barcelona. Gettier argues that one cannot claim that Smith has this knowledge because, though he has uttered a true proposition, it is a product of guess-work, and is only correct by accident. The entire proposition H is therefore correct by the simple rule of logic, that disjunction is true if at least a component of the proposition is true. With, the Gettier Problem, contrary to the claim of Lukasz, remains a genuine problem in epistemology.

There are better grounds to criticize Gettier and the Gettier Problem. One of such is that, Gettier gives scanty information about the man who said that Jones is the man that will get the job. He only told us that the man is the president of the company. How truthful and reliable the president is, is unknown. The intention of the president is also unknown. Then, we are not told whether that president made the statement before, during or after the interview. If it was before the interview, it can be reasoned that the president wanted to judge the emotion of Smith. If it is during the interview, it may be due to the performance of both candidates. If it is after the interview, and Jones did not get the job, it may be that some things cropped up when the president was having a discussion with other members of the panel. In case two of the Gettier's counter-examples, we see Jones driving a Ford and giving a ride to his friend, Smith, and Smith concludes that Jones has a Ford. There is no case of justified belief here. It would have been another thing if Smith had asked from Jones if he was the owner of the car, for, it was possible that he hired, or a friend put it under his care for some time, or anything. He could have demanded for the receipt of the car, or even taken time to find out if Jones always parked the car in his house. Yet, the Gettier Problem remains valid. Since justified True Belief is also in need of justification, the search for the fourth condition should still agitate the minds of epistemologists. One major contribution of Gettier therefore to the field of epistemology still that, search for knowledge must be continual.

2. References

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