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AN ALLEGED DEFECT IN GETTIER COUNTER-EXAMPLES

A number of philosophers have contended that Gettier counter-examples to the justified true belief analysis of knowledge all rely on a certain false principle. For example, in their recent paper, 'Knowledge Without Paradox',¹ Robert G. Meyers and Kenneth Stern argue that '(c)ounter-examples of the Gettier sort all turn on the principle that someone can be justified in accepting a certain proposition *h* on evidence *p* even though *p* is false'.² They contend that this principle is false, and hence that the counter-examples fail. Their view is that one proposition, *p*, can justify another, *h*, only if *p* is true. With this in mind, they accept the justified true belief analysis.

D. M. Armstrong defends a similar view in *Relief, Truth and Knowledge*.³ He writes:

This simple consideration seems to make redundant the ingenious argument of . . . Gettier's . . . article . . . Gettier produces counter-examples to the thesis that justified true belief is knowledge by producing true beliefs based on justifiably believed grounds, . . . but where these grounds are in fact *false*. But because possession of such grounds could not constitute possession of *knowledge*, I should have thought it obvious that they are too weak to serve as suitable grounds.⁴

Thus he concludes that Gettier's examples are defective because they rely on the false principle that false propositions can justify one's belief in other propositions. Armstrong's view seems to be that one proposition, *p*, can justify another, *h*, only if *p* is known to be true (unlike Meyers and Stern who demand only that *p* in fact be true).⁵

I think, though, that there are examples very much like Gettier's that do not rely on this alleged false principle. To see this, let us first con-

sider one example in the form in which Meyers and Stern discuss it, and then consider a slight modification of it.

Suppose Mr. Nogot tells Smith that he owns a Ford and even shows him a certificate to that effect. Suppose, further, that up till now Nogot has always been reliable and honest in his dealings with Smith. Let us call the conjunction of all this evidence *m*. Smith is thus justified in believing that Mr. Nogot who is in his office owns a Ford (*r*) and, consequently, is justified in believing that someone in his office owns a Ford (*h*).⁶

As it turns out, though, *m* and *h* are true but *r* is false. So, the Gettier example runs, Smith has a justified true belief in *h*, but he clearly does not know *h*.

What is supposed to justify *h* in this example is *p*. But since *r* is false, the example runs afoul of the disputed principle. Since *r* is false, it justifies nothing. Hence, if the principle is false, the counter-example fails.

We can alter the example slightly, however, so that what justifies *h* for Smith is true and he knows that it is. Suppose he deduces from *m* its existential generalization:

(a) There is someone in the office who told Smith that he owns a Ford and even showed him a certificate to that effect, and who up till now has always been reliable and honest in his dealings with Smith.

(*n*), we should note, is true and Smith knows that it is, since he has correctly deduced it from *m*, which he knows to be true. On the basis of *n* Smith believes *h*—someone in the office owns a Ford. Just as the Nogot evidence, *m*, justified *r*—Nogot owns a Ford—in the original example, *n* justifies *h* in this example. Thus Smith has a justified true belief in *h*, knows his evidence to be true, but still does not know *h*.

I conclude that even if a proposition can be justified for a person only if his evidence is true, or only if he knows it to be true, there are still counter-examples to the justified true belief analysis of knowledge of the Gettier sort. In the above example, Smith reasoned from the proposition *m*, which he knew to be true, to the proposition *n*, which he also knew, to the truth *h*; yet he still did not know *h*. So some examples, similar to Gettier's, do not 'turn on the principle that someone can be justified in accepting a certain proposition . . . even though (his evidence) . . . is false'.

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¹ *The Journal of Philosophy* 6 (March 22, 1973) pp. 147-60.

² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³ (1973).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵ Armstrong ultimately goes on to defend a rather different analysis.

⁶ Meyers and Stern, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.