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## What is true. Gettier cases and the problem of truth

### Abstract:

One of the most discussed articles in the theory of knowledge is Edmund Gettier's article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", published in 1963. In this article Gettier undermined the view that knowledge is justified true belief. I think that Gettier's analysis has consequences not only for the question what knowledge is but also for our idea of truth. In this paper I argue that an analysis in the sense of Gettier shows that a statement can be both true and not true at the same time.

### Introduction

One of the most discussed articles in the theory of knowledge is Edmund Gettier's article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", published in 1963. In this article Gettier undermined the view that knowledge is justified true belief. It was the start of a lively discussion on what knowledge is, which lasts till today. However, I think that Gettier's analysis has consequences not only for the question what knowledge is but also for our idea of truth. In section 1 I'll give a summary of Gettier's analysis. In this section I'll not use one of Gettier's cases, but I'll describe a case of my own. In section 2 I'll apply an analysis in the sense of Gettier's approach to a case in which the question for truth is at stake. In section 3 I argue that a statement doesn't need to be true even if its content is true.

### 1. The Gettier problem

According to a standard definition knowledge is justified true belief: If we believe that something is the case; if we have good reasons for this belief; and if what is believed is also true, then we say that we know what is the case. So far, so good, but take this example:

I am worried whether my best cow Betsy hasn't been stolen from the field where she is supposed to be at pasture. I walk from my farm to the field, where I see a cow in the middle of the herd. The cow exactly looks like Betsy, although I don't find it necessary to walk so near to her that I am 100% sure that she really is Betsy. I go home again and I tell my wife that I know that Betsy is safe. My wife wants to check it, too, and goes also to the field. There she sees Betsy somewhere in the back and Jane in the middle of the herd. Because Betsy is often confused with Jane, if you look at her from a distance, she makes herself 100% sure that it is really Betsy there in the back of the field by checking her earmark. Betsy hasn't been stolen, just as I thought.

Now the question is: Did I *know* that Betsy hadn't been stolen? For (1) I *believed* that Betsy was safe; (2) my belief was *justified* for I had checked it (although I had unknowingly confused Jane with Betsy); (3) it was *true* that Betsy hadn't been stolen.

In his article just mentioned Edmund Gettier discussed cases like this one where we seemed to have justified true belief, but where most of us would not say that we "know", just as it is doubtful that I, the farmer, "know" that Betsy is in the field, since I had mistaken Jane for Betsy. Cases like mine and other more refined "Gettier cases" cast doubt upon the definition of knowledge as justified true belief, for they show that it is possible to have justified true belief without having knowledge. Therefore the theory of knowledge that holds that knowledge is justified true cannot be correct. We need more for being able to say to have knowledge. But what? I leave the question for what is it and refer to the extensive discussion that followed for possible answers. My question here is different, namely what the consequences of Gettier's approach are for the idea of truth.

## 2. *What is true*

I take up again the example that I used in section 1, although I have changed it a bit:

I am worried whether my best cow Betsy hasn't been stolen from the field where she is supposed to be at pasture. I walk from my farm to the field, where I see a cow in the middle of the herd that exactly looks like Betsy and I am 100% convinced that she is Betsy. Therefore I don't find it necessary to walk to her and check her earmark. I walk home again and say to my wife: "Betsy is in the field". Actually, I often confuse Betsy with Jane, when I look from a distance at her, and also now I actually saw Jane. However, Betsy is also in the field, and I have seen Betsy, too, for Betsy was grazing left of Jane, and I have seen both cows. However, I thought that the cow left of the cow I mistook for Betsy was Jane.

The problem analyzed by Gettier is whether I *know* whether Betsy is in the field. When talking about truth we have a related problem: Is it *true* that Betsy is in the field? Or rather, since truth is about statements: Is what I say to my wife – namely "Betsy is in the field" – true?

I think that according to most theories of truth – whether it be the correspondence theory of truth, the coherence theory of truth, the consensus theory of truth, or whichever – the statement that Betsy is in the field is true, if taken as such. And when I said to my wife "Betsy is in the field", I wanted to say that the cow with earmark HW123 is in the field – since HW123 is Betsy's earmark – and so that Betsy, a cow with earmark HW123, is in the field. That's true, indeed. Nevertheless, at the moment that I am saying this statement to my wife, in my mind "Betsy" refers to a cow at a certain place in the field right of the cow I had mistakenly identified as Jane. Let's suppose that Jane has earmark HW122, and that when I utter the statement "Betsy is in the field" to my wife, I have an image of two cows in my mind and I mean to say that the right cow is in the field. In *this* statement "Betsy" refers to the cow with earmark HW122 and *this* statement is false, even though Betsy is in the field, and Jane is also in the field, and even though also the cows HW122 and HW123 are in the field, and even though I have seen both cows in the field (but had unknowingly mistaken the one for the other). The upshot is that the same statement can be true and false at the same time. For what I meant to say when I uttered the sentence "Betsy is in the field" to my wife is that – for short – Betsy HW123 is in the field, which is true. And that's what I said. However by uttering the sentence "Betsy is in the field" I said at the same time that Betsy HW122 is in the field, and this is clearly not true for there is no cow named Betsy HW122, and even in case she exists somewhere else in the world, she is not in my field. The statement "Betsy is in the field" is both true and false.

## 3. *Conclusion*

In section 1 I wrote that according to a standard definition knowledge is justified true belief: If we believe that something is the case; if we have good reasons for this belief; and if what is believed is also true, then we say that we know what is the case. I applied this to the idea of truth. Now we have this: 1) I state that something is the case (*viz.* that Betsy is in the field); 2) I have good reasons for this statement; 3) What is stated is true. The problem is 3), for what is truly true is that Betsy is in the field and that is what I stated, but it is not true in the sense in which I uttered the true sentence to my wife. I think that this conclusion must be valid even if we argue that "Betsy" has different references (HW123 and HW122), for we cannot disconnect these references, because *at the moment* I uttered the sentence "Betsy is in the field", I *both* said in *this one* sentence that HW123 (= Betsy) was in the field *and* that HW122 (= the right cow of the two cows I saw) was, which was simultaneously true and not true. A statement doesn't need to be true even if its contents refers to reality in some sense.

*References*

- Gettier, Edmund, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", in *Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 6. (Jun., 1963), pp. 121-123.