

Knowledge Can Have False Grounds

Since the beginning of history, people have wondered how we can have knowledge. Do we know anything, or is life an illusion? If we do know some things, what do we know? There are many hotly debated topics in the theory of knowledge which will probably never be solved. Edmund Gettier was a professor at UMass Amherst. In one paper he argued against JTB. Another professor at Oxford, Roger Clark, added to JTB by stating that knowledge is fully grounded true belief. I do not think that Clark is correct, because sometimes a belief that is based on false grounds can still be knowledge.

Here is Gettier's problem. He imagine's a person, Smith, and another person, Jones, who want to get a job. Both men have ten coins in their pockets. Smith thinks that Jones will get the job because he overhears someone saying that. He also thinks that Smith has ten coins in his pocket, because he counted them. So he thinks that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. His belief is justified, because he has good evidence for it. And it is also true. But what Smith doesn't know is that he is going to get the job, not Jones. So he does not know that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

Now here is where Clark comes in. "In each case a proposition which is in fact true is believed on grounds which are in fact false." Clark also writes, "Cases can be devised in which true justified belief fails to be knowledge because a *non-deductive* ground is false." In other words, Smith thinks that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket because he thinks that Jones will get the job, but really he will get the job. This is false grounds.

Clark says that a belief is Knowledge if it is “fully grounded” which means that all of its grounds are true. To find the grounds of a belief you ask the person: “What are your grounds for saying Jones owns a Ford?” And they say “Brown told me he always has owned one.” And then you say “What are your grounds for claiming Brown knows this?” Don’t ask me why you would ask all these rude questions to Jones. I think if you kept asking, he would get suspicious. But let’s pretend that this kind of conversation is normal for you, who knows, maybe it was normal for Roger Clark in 1963. Anyway, at some point even Clark admits that the questions just get silly. And then you know you are done asking questions.

Now imagine another case. Sam is going to the store. He says to his housemates: “Do we need anything at the store?” They say yes. Cassandra says “we need butter” and Ben says “we are almost out of butter.” But Ben is wrong, because there is a pound of butter in the fridge. Meanwhile, though, Sam and his housemates have also volunteered to bake cookies for their philosophy class, and they need a lot more butter because of that. Sam believes that their housemates need butter, but some of his grounds are true and some of them are false. I think that Sam knows that they need butter. But he believes it on false grounds. Here is another objection to Clark. How would I even know what my grounds are? Like I said, people do not usually ask me. Sometimes I believe things but I don’t remember why. Other times people can be mistaken about why they believe something, for example if they were brainwashed, just forgetful, or prejudiced. People might think their grounds for not hiring someone is because she isn’t right for the job, but really it’s because she reminds them of their ex girlfriend and the painful memories give them negative feelings. If I don’t know what my grounds are, how can we know

anything? Maybe we do not know anything at all. Still, I think Clark is right that our beliefs must be fully grounded.

Clark might reply that Sam does not really know. People often think they know a lot when really they don't know much at all. Sam only asked a couple people, but he didn't look in the fridge himself. So he is just being lazy. There is no problem saying that someone doesn't know if they didn't even bother looking in the fridge. On top of that, Clark could say that Sam does know, because he has one fully-grounded chain of knowledge that goes through what he heard from Cassandra. And thirdly, Clark could point out that after he hears from Ben, Sam probably forgot what Cassandra said in the first place because what Ben said was more specific. If you asked Sam (rudely) "What are your grounds for thinking that you need butter?" he would probably only mention what Ben said. He would probably assume that Cassandra also thought that they needed butter because the butter was almost gone. So what Cassandra said is not a ground for his belief anymore. So all of the grounds at a certain level are false, and so Sam does not know.

I agree with all of these points. I think Clark is right that Sam can't know if he didn't check the fridge himself. Also Sam does have a fully-grounded chain of knowledge, so he does know. And finally, he doesn't know because what Cassandra said to him is no longer a ground for his belief. So Clark has a good reply to my objection. However, I don't think Clark's reply works. Here is why. Sometimes I know things without checking the fridge myself, because I trust my housemates and I know that they looked in the fridge. Second, if Sam does have a fully-grounded chain of knowledge, he also has false grounds, and so Clark's view still says that he does not know. And finally, I

think even if in some cases Sam would forget what Cassandra said, in other cases he would not. So he still has some true grounds for his belief.

The topic of how to solve the Gettier case will probably never be solved. I agree that Clark is right in some cases. But in other cases he is wrong. In the end, it is up to each person to determine what knowledge is.

Works Cited

Gettier

Clark