

Knowledge Can Have False Grounds

Edmund Gettier famously argued that knowledge cannot be analyzed as justified true belief (JTB). Roger Clark proposed a solution: knowledge, he argued, is JTB that is believed *on true grounds*. I will argue that Clark's solution fails: there are some cases in which an agent bases her beliefs on false grounds, yet she still has knowledge. The paper will proceed as follows: first I will explain Gettier's problem, and Clark's solution. Then I will present a counterexample to Clark. Finally, I will consider how Clark might reply to my objection, and argue that his reply does not succeed.

Gettier's problem is as follows.¹ Consider someone, Smith, who is interviewing for a job. He overhears someone saying that another interviewee, Jones, is going to be offered the job. At the same time, he sees Jones counting out the change in his pocket for the vending machine, and notices that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. So Smith comes to believe:

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

Gettier assumes (and I agree with him) that Smith's belief in P is justified. And it is also true. Now here's the twist. Although Smith doesn't realize this, the person he overheard was mistaken, and Jones will not be offered the job. Instead, Smith himself is the one who will be offered the job. Coincidentally, Smith also has ten coins in his own pocket. So P is true, but not for the reason Smith expected.

¹ This case is adapted from Gettier [1963], p. 122.

Smith has a justified, true belief in P. But does he know that P? Gettier's judgment about this case (which, again, I agree with) is "no." So this case is a counterexample to the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief.

Clark observes that in Gettier's case, Smith's belief is based on a false belief, namely:

J: Jones will get the job.

Clark thinks that this explains why Smith does not know that P. J is part of Smith's "grounds" for believing P, and J is false.

Before going further, it will be helpful to look at what Clark means by "grounds". Clark understands grounds as the answer to a question, such as, "What are your grounds for saying that P?"² (To define it in a less circular way, I think it is also plausible to imagine asking: "What are your reasons for saying that P?" or just "Why do you think that P?") If we asked Smith why he believed P, he would probably cite J, so J is part of his grounds for P. To find all of the grounds of a belief, we can keep asking questions about the grounds for one's grounds, and the grounds for those grounds ("what are your grounds for saying that J?" and so on) until we reach a point where questioning no longer makes sense. At that point we will have determined all of the grounds of the belief. If the belief is true and justified, and all of the grounds are also true, Clark says that the belief is "fully grounded." His final view is that a justified, true, fully-grounded belief is knowledge.

Now that we have Clark's view on the table, we can assess it. I think that while Clark seems to be on to something important about Gettier cases, his proposal can't be

² See Clark [1963], p. 47.

quite right. That's because there are some cases in which a person believes something on both true *and* false grounds, and still seem to have knowledge. Here is an example:

Suppose Sam is going out to do some errands. On his way out the door he asks each of his housemates, "Is there anything we need from the store?" First his housemate Cassandra says, "Yes, we need butter." In the next room, his other housemate Ben says, "We're almost out of butter." Sam heads out the door with the justified belief that:

B: Sam and his housemates need butter.

Suppose B is also true; they do need butter. But here's the twist: there is almost a full pound of butter in their fridge. So Ben was wrong. The reason they need butter is that they promised to bake four dozen cookies for their philosophy class, and so they will need much more butter than what they currently have in the fridge.

Sam has a justified, true belief that B. It also seems to me that he *knows* that B. But some of his grounds for believing B are false. If we asked Sam, "What are your grounds for saying that you and your housemates need butter?" He would probably reply: "we are almost out of butter." But this is false; Sam and his housemates are not almost out of butter. So according to Clark's view, Sam cannot know that B. Clark's view therefore gets the wrong answer in this case. This means that Clark's view is not right.

How could Clark reply to my objection? One option for Clark is to deny that Sam has knowledge. He might argue as follows: once Sam hears from Ben, the testimony from Cassandra no longer grounds his belief that B. First Clark might point out, as I argued above, that if we asked Sam, "what are your grounds for saying that you and your housemates need butter?" he would probably reply: "we are almost out of butter." But Clark could add to this that Sam would probably *not* reply: "we are almost out of butter

and Cassandra said that we need butter.” He probably would not mention Cassandra at all! So does her testimony really still ground his belief? Second, Clark could point out that if Sam were to learn that there was almost a pound of butter in the fridge, it is plausible that he would come to doubt both Ben’s *and* Cassandra’s testimony – not just Ben’s. Clark might take both of these considerations to show that Ben’s testimony supersedes Cassandra’s, so that once Sam talks to Ben, Cassandra’s testimony no longer matters. If this is true, Sam does not have any true grounds for his belief.

I agree that in the case I just imagined, where Sam really would not cite Cassandra’s testimony separately from Ben’s, it is plausible that Sam does not know. In that case, Clark’s view would get the right answer. Still, it seems possible to me that there *could* be cases in which Sam retains both the true grounds and the false grounds for his belief, and still knows that B. So Clark’s analysis can’t be right. To fix this problem, Clark could amend his proposal so that any “link” in a person’s chain of grounding can only be supported by one link below it, ruling out multiple grounds at the same “level.” This would rule out Sam’s case as a counterexample. But it also does not seem very plausible to say that a person can only have one reason for each of her beliefs. Often it seems that we do have multiple different grounds for our opinions. So this approach does not seem very promising for Clark.

I have argued that although Clark seems to be making an important observation about Gettier cases, his proposal is not correct. There are cases in which a person holds a belief on false grounds, yet still has knowledge. Furthermore, it does not seem to me that Clark is able to respond to this objection without making major changes to his view. I conclude that Clark’s view cannot be right: knowledge is not fully-grounded JTB.

Works Cited

Clark, Michael. [1963] "Knowledge and Grounds: A Comment on Mr. Gettier's Paper." *Analysis* 24(2): 46-48.

Gettier, Edmund. [1963] "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23(6): 121-123.