

## Responses to Gettier

This handout follows the handout on ‘The tripartite definition of knowledge’. You should read that handout first.

### INFALLIBILISM

Some people argue that knowledge involves certainty. One way of expressing this is to claim that a belief is not justified unless you can be certain of it. ‘Certainty’ here doesn’t mean a psychological feeling (which could vary from one person to another), but refers to the belief being certain. We could use this view of justification to argue that Gettier cases demonstrate that we cannot be certain of our beliefs in normal cases. Because we can’t tell whether we are in a normal case or a Gettier case, then our beliefs in normal cases are not certain, and so are not justification. Gettier doesn’t show that knowledge is not justified true belief. What he shows is that our beliefs are rarely justified.

This argument suggests infallibilism, the view that for my belief to be certain is for it to be impossible that I have made a mistake. Infallibilism seems plausible because if I know that *p*, then I can’t be mistaken about *p*, because no one can know what is false. If I know that *p*, I am justified in believing that *p*. So if I am justified in believing that *p*, *p* must be true, I can’t possibly be mistaken. So if it is possible that I am mistaken, then I can’t be justified in believing that *p*. This rules out Gettier cases (because I do not have justified true belief), while defending the justified true belief theory of knowledge.

However, it is rare that our evidence rules out the possibility of error. So infallibilism leads to scepticism. We can object that a belief can be justified without being true. For instance, you can have very good evidence, but still be mistaken. Or again, according to reliabilism, the reliable process may occasionally produce a false belief without ceasing to be reliable.

### Rejecting the argument for infallibilism

The argument for infallibilism rests on a logical error. Infallibilism is the claim that ‘if I know that *p*, then I can’t be mistaken about *p*’. But this claim has more than one possible meaning, depending on how one understands the ‘can’t’:

Reading 1: ‘It can’t be the case that if I know that *p*, I am mistaken that *p*.’

We should agree with this; in fact, it is analytically true. By definition, you cannot know what is false.

Reading 2: ‘If I know that *p*, (I am in a position that) I can’t possibly be mistaken that *p*.’

This is what infallibilism claims. It is a much stronger claim than Reading 1, because it says that not only am I not mistaken, but I can’t possibly be mistaken that *p*. Obviously, there are many cases in which I could be mistaken that *p*, but in fact I am not.

Furthermore, if my true belief rests on evidence, there are good reasons why I am not mistaken. Nevertheless, I could be; this isn't impossible.

The first argument for infallibilism used Reading 1 to support Reading 2. But this is a mistake. The two claims are distinct, since one is a claim about whether I am mistaken, and the other is a claim about whether I could be mistaken. So if we are going to accept infallibilism, we need some other, independent reason for believing Reading 2.

### **'INDEFEASIBILITY'**

My memory of where I put it and my habit of always putting it in the same place justify my belief about where my watch is. In normal cases, this justification is adequate. In the Gettier case, it is 'defeated'. The facts in this case – that the thief came in, knocked my watch and replaced it – make my usual justification insufficient. This has inspired philosophers to accept that knowledge is not justified true belief, but requires a fourth condition:

4. My justification for believing that p is not defeated by the facts.

If my justification is not defeated by the facts, it is 'fully justified'. In a normal situation, my belief is fully justified, so I know that p. In a Gettier case, my belief is justified, but not 'fully justified' since it is defeated by the facts; so I don't know that p. This was the result we wanted.

There isn't any subjective difference between normal cases and Gettier cases. In both, I believe what I do (where my watch is) for exactly the same reasons. According to the fully justified true belief theory of knowledge, whether I know where my watch is depends not just on my evidence, but also on the situation I am in. So it makes knowledge dependent on something that is not available to me (since I can't tell which situation I am in).

### **KNOWLEDGE AS APPROPRIATELY CAUSED BELIEF**

If Gettier cases show that knowledge is not justified true belief, perhaps we can argue instead that knowledge is true belief that is 'appropriately caused'. But another Gettier case (from Alvin Goldman, 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge') suggests this is inadequate: Henry is driving through the countryside and enters an area, Barn County, in which, unknown to him, there are many facades of barns. From the road, they look just like real barns. Henry believes they are barns. Now, in one instance, he happens to be looking at the one and only real barn in the area, and he believes it is a barn.

It is very plausible to say that he doesn't know it is a barn, since he falsely thought all the facades were barns, and it is sheer chance that he is looking at the only real barn. But what is 'inappropriate' in how his belief was caused? For instance, it was caused by precisely what makes it true. It was even caused by a very reliable process, viz. vision. It's just that in Barn County, this generally reliable process has produced a true belief in circumstances in which the belief still seems only accidentally true.

Let us assume that 'appropriately caused' means 'caused by a reliable process'. The theory that knowledge is true belief that is caused by a reliable process is reliabilism about knowledge. This is a distinct theory from the claim that knowledge is justified true

belief, and to be justified, a belief must be caused by a reliable process. The Barn County example attacks both theories – Henry’s belief about the barn is true and caused by a reliable process, but it is not knowledge.

The trouble with Henry is that, in Barn County, he can’t discriminate between relevant possibilities – is he looking at a barn or a façade? In other situations, he can discriminate between barns and things that aren’t barns just fine, so he knows a barn when he sees one. We can use this thought in any of three ways:

1. To be knowledge, a true belief must be caused by a reliable process, but also the subject must be able to use the process to discriminate between relevant possibilities in the actual situation. In Barn County, Henry can’t reliably discriminate between real barns and facades. That’s why he doesn’t know that what he sees is a barn when it is. Justification (whatever that is), however, doesn’t come into it.
2. Knowledge is justified true belief + the fourth condition that the subject can discriminate between relevant possibilities in the actual situation. Unlike the first option, this position retains the connection between knowledge and justification.
3. Knowledge is justified true belief. To be justified, the belief must be caused by a reliable process. However, if I can’t use the process to rule out real alternative possibilities, then it isn’t sufficiently reliable, and so the belief isn’t justified. In other words, we could say that whether a process counts as reliable is relative to the actual situation. Henry’s vision is not a reliable process for producing beliefs about barns when he’s in Barn County. In Gettier cases, my beliefs aren’t justified, because the usual processes that cause them are unreliable, which is why I don’t know. However, the justified true belief theory is right.

## **KNOWLEDGE AS TRACKING THE TRUTH**

Robert Nozick (*Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 172ff.) presents a form of reliabilism about knowledge (option 1 above). He argued that instead of a true belief that p needing to be justified to qualify as knowledge, it needed to ‘track the truth’. What he meant was that

1. if p were not true, then the person would not believe that p; and
2. if p were true, then the person would believe that p.

The first condition tends to be more important: Henry does not know he is looking at a barn, because he would believe it was a barn even if it were a façade.

We might argue that this undermines normal cases as well, e.g. when outside Barn County, Henry doesn’t know he’s looking at a barn because he could be in Barn County without knowing it. But this misinterprets the first condition. It doesn’t imply that I could not be mistaken, no matter what. Instead, they should be understood to mean that, given how the world is, in situations which are likely to come up, I am able to tell when p is true and when it is not. I know that p if there are no relevant situations in which either a. or b. are false.

## **DENYING THE PRINCIPLE OF CLOSURE**

The claim that knowledge is ‘closed’ under logical entailment (the Principle of Closure) says that, If proposition 1 logically entails proposition 2, and I know proposition 1, then I know (or can know, by deduction) proposition 2. The thought here is that if I know a

truth, I can know any truth that I can validly deduce from it. This seems very uncontroversial. Surely deduction gives us knowledge.

However, reliabilism and truth-tracking have to deny this principle. The following deduction is sound. If the Principle of Closure is right, then I can know the conclusion. But the theories claim I do not know the conclusion:

1. In a normal case, I know where my watch is.
2. I know that if I know where my watch is, I am not in a Gettier situation.
3. Therefore, in a normal case, I know that I am not in a Gettier situation.

The theories accept that if I am in a normal case, I know that *p*, whereas if I am in a Gettier case, I do not. This establishes the premises. However, they accept that I may not know whether or not I am in a Gettier case. Which means I can't always know what I can deduce from what I do know. This is a bizarre result – surely logic is reliable, tracks the truth, and gives us knowledge!

However, denying the Principle of Closure can be used to defeat scepticism. The sceptic uses the Principle of Closure to argue that in order to know that I have two hands, I must know that I am not a brain in a vat:

1. I know that if I have two hands, I am not a brain in a vat.
2. Therefore, if I know I have two hands, then I know I am not a brain in a vat.
3. However, I do not know I am not a brain in a vat (for the usual sceptical reasons).
4. Therefore, I do not know if I have two hands.

Many answers to scepticism reject 3. However, reliabilism and truth-tracking reject 2. I can know I have two hands without knowing that I am not a brain in a vat. I don't have reliable means for telling whether I am a brain in a vat; if I were a brain in a vat, then I would still believe that I was not. So I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat. However, if I am not a brain in a vat, the possibility of being a brain in a vat is not a relevant alternative. If I am not a brain in a vat, then the process that causes my belief that I have two hands is reliable, or it tracks the truth. So I can know I have two hands without knowing whether I am a brain in a vat.

The sceptic responds: if I were a brain in a vat, I would have no hands. And I don't know that I'm not a brain in a vat. How could I know that I have two hands and not know that I do not have no hands?!