

No False Grounds: Overcoming Problems of Justified True Belief

Britton Watson

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

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The standard view of propositional knowledge is based on the concept of Justified True Belief which is formulated as:

(t) S knows that P *IFF*

(i) P is true,

(ii) S believes that P, and

(iii) S is justified in believing that P.

The first condition of this is truth: a proposition is only true if it corresponds to the facts of the world. A proposition is false if it does not conform to the facts. You cannot know that Abraham Lincoln was the first President. You can know that George Washington was the first President. The second condition of propositional knowledge is belief. To believe something is to accept it as true and to not accept alternatives such as disbelieving it or suspending judgement about it. You cannot know that George Washington was the first President without believing it. The third condition is justification. Justification comes from sufficient evidence, other types of justification. Because of this, justification is the most fluid of three ingredients formulating Justified True Belief.

Edmund Gettier famously argued that argue that (a) is false in that the conditions of the argument do not constitute a sufficient condition for the truth of the proposition. For Gettier, a subject can justifiably believe a false proposition. Because this belief is false, then the subject does not have knowledge. Here is a Gettier case example:

Gettier's Election Case:

Suppose that Smith and Jones are competing for the presidency. And supposed that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

(a) Jones is the man who will win the presidency, and Jones has a beechwood pen in his suit pocket

Smith's evidence for (a) might be that the most recent polls assured him that Jones has far more favorable poll numbers and that he, Smith, had seen the pen in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (a) entails:

(b) The man who will get the job has a beechwood pen in his pocket.

Let us suppose that Smith sees the entailment from (a) to (b), and accepts (b) on the grounds of (a), for which he has strong evidence. In this case, Smith is clearly justified in believing that (a) is true.

But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will win the presidency. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has a beechwood pen in his suit pocket. Proposition (b) is then true, though proposition (a), from which Smith inferred (b), is false. In this example all of the following are true: (i) (a) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (b) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (b) is true. But it is equally clear that Smith does not *know* that (b) is true; for (b) is true in virtue of the beechwood pen in Smith's suit pocket, while Smith does not know that he has a beechwood pen in his pocket, and bases his belief in (b) on knowing of the beechwood pen in Jones's pocket, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will win the presidency. (Gettier 121). It seems that Gettier is a strong adversary of the traditional analysis of knowledge through justified true belief. However, Gettier can be defeated through a fourth condition

The fourth condition: no false grounds

There are a variety of potential fourth conditions that attempt to refute the Gettier offensive. The strongest argument against Gettier is the no false grounds theory. In this case, all of the subject's grounds for believing the proposition is true. This new theory of knowledge is formulated as:

(t) S knows that P *IFF*

(i) P is true,

(ii) S believes that P, and

- (iii) S is justified in believing that P.
- (iv) All of S's grounds for believing P are true.

What is the problem here? Take the example of Smith and a Ford: "two people in the office tell Smith that they own Fords. Smith infers that someone in the office owns a Ford. But it turns out that one is lying and the other is telling the truth. Does Smith know that someone in his office owns a Ford?"

There is an attempt to say that a false ground appears here and modifies premise (iv) to say: "[t]he grounds for a belief include all beliefs that play any role in the formation of the belief, including 'background assumptions' and presuppositions" (Feldman 32). Smith is believing something on false grounds. Therefore, it is not knowledge. However, is Smith genuinely believing something that is untrue? It appears not. Smith is does someone owns a Ford in the office, even if there is a false proposition.

The Essential Solution

Feldman gives us a final attempt to overcome Gettier's rebuttal to the traditional analysis of knowledge. This new premise is formulated as:

- (t) S knows that P *IFF*
- (i) P is true,
- (ii) S believes that P, and
- (iii) S is justified in believing that P.
- (iv) S's Justification for P does not essentially depend on any falsehood.

Feldman claims that the "no false grounds" theory can be adjusted to "no false grounds that are essential to the justification" (36). The lie or liar is not essential to the issue and the no false grounds objection is countered. One potential objection to the no essential false grounds theory is:

Smith believes the Sure-Fire match he is about to strike will light, since Sure-Fire matches have never been defective before in a billion trials. In fact, though, the match is the first defective Sure-Fire, and it won't light by striking. However, by chance, a random burst of radiation lights the match when Smith strikes it. Did Smith know it would light?

The problem here is an inversion of the objection to the no false grounds theory: everything Smith believes about the Sure-Fire match is true, yet Smith will be wrong according to this objection. The probability of the match lighting through the same chain of events is incredibly high, yet a bizarre occurrence happens that refutes Feldman's no essential false grounds theory.

Is this truly a problem though? The probability of the match successfully lighting based on previous experiments is .999999999, therefore Smith is not believing it on a false ground. A skeptic such as David Hume would view this as an issue with causality, we are not believing the match would light based on truly understanding a cycle of events. Rather, it looks as though we have no justification, or rational ground, for our inferences outside of our box of experiences. In common law, such an event would be considered an "Act of God." Does this Humean approach refute Feldman? No! The refutation is based on probability and notions of causality, but not on essential false grounds. At no point does Smith's reasoning rely on falsehood. Therefore, on epistemic grounds, what Smith knows is true. Smith has knowledge of the Sure-Fire match working.

The defense of the standard view of knowledge relies on the strength of the no essential false grounds theory. This form of justified true belief does not essentially depend on falsehood. Critically, this argument allows for falsification—there is a clear threshold for knowledge and non-knowledge. Knowledge is based in truth. For a fact to be true, it cannot rely on essentially false evidence. Therefore, a subject whose knowledge does not essentially depend on any falsehood.

Works Cited

Feldman, Richard. *Epistemology*. Pearson. 2002.

Gettier, Edmund L. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* Vol. 23, no. 6, 1963. Pp. 121-123.