

Definite Descriptions in Argument: Gettier's Ten-coins Example

Yussif Yakubu

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Abstract

In this article, I use Edmund Gettier's *Ten Coins* hypothetical scenario to illustrate some reasoning errors in the use of *definite descriptions*. The Gettier problem, central as it is to modern epistemology, is first and foremost an argument, which Gettier (1963) constructs to prove a contrary conclusion to a widely held view in epistemology. Whereas the epistemological claims in the case have been extensively analysed conceptually, the strategies and tools from other philosophical disciplines such as analytic philosophy of language, logic and argumentation that Gettier deploys in the case have scarcely received any attention. This work abstracts from the epistemological content and examines Gettier's handling of the definite description involved, and how that affects the cogency of his argument.

1. Introduction

In his famous *ten coins* example, Gettier (1963) sets up a scenario through which he purports to establish four claims: (i) that an agent has a belief, (ii) that the belief is true, (iii) that the agent is justified in forming the belief and (iv) that the agent has no knowledge of that belief. If Gettier did indeed establish all four claims under the same circumstance and context, then he would have overturned the Standard Analysis of Knowledge as a "justified true belief (JTB)." The epistemological discourse on the Gettier problem has focused on the analysis of the epistemological concepts Gettier claims to establish - belief, justification, truth and knowledge.

Some of these judgements are based on our intuitions about the epistemological concepts (Hetherington 2010; Turri, 2011; Nagel et al. 2013). However, Gettier deployed strategies from logic and analytic philosophy of language to prove the epistemological claims and they have hardly had any scrutiny. This paper evaluates the non-epistemological content of the argument, particularly, the way it deals with the definite description involved.

Very often, a single word means different things in natural language. Similarly, a single natural language sentence can be used to express a number of different beliefs or propositions. When an argument involves shifting between the different meanings of a single word, we reject it as fallacious. Similarly, in situations where a single sentence expresses multiple propositions, arguments that involve shifting between the different propositions that the sentence expresses could be constructed. Such arguments are also fallacious and ought to be rejected. However, this latter manifestation of the *fallacy of equivocation* has not been prominently noted, and this has allowed it to pass unchallenged in some esteemed philosophical discourse. As I will show, the Gettier argument under discussion here, is an example of that. The debilitating blow that Gettier's challenge is widely construed to deal the Standard Analysis belies the failure to recognize this fatal flaw of the Gettier argument..

In the section following the introduction, I summarize Gettier's *Ten Coins* argument, which I will show to ride on an equivocation involving different interpretations of a definite description. In the subsequent sections, I discuss how subject-predicate sentences, which are the subject of Gettier's argument, can vary in meaning depending upon context of usage. I will then show how Gettier's *Ten Coins* argument shifts between the different meanings of a subject-predicate sentence. Gettier presents a second and separate scenario (CASE II) in the same paper. I discuss only the CASE I here. However, the CASE II, in a similar fashion as the CASE I, shifts from a

ground that justifies the main proposition in the argument to a different ground that makes that proposition true. Even though the fallacious argument form appears to recur there, it involves some rules of formal logic rather than a definite description and is therefore outside the scope of this current discussion.¹

2. Gettier's Argument

The Standard Analysis, in epistemology, stipulates three conditions to be necessary and sufficient for knowledge: i. There must be a belief. ii. The belief must be true. And iii. The belief must be justified. Hence, the popular conception of knowledge (K) as a “Justified True Belief” (JTB for short). The claim of the standard analysis therefore is:

(1) Every Justified True Belief is Knowledge

Then in a (1963) paper, Edmund Gettier presented two hypothetical scenarios which purported to demonstrate that the three conditions for knowledge under the standard analysis could be met and there would still be a failure of knowledge. In other words, it is possible to have, in some given situation, a justified true belief that is not knowledge. Thus:

(2) Some Justified True Beliefs are not Knowledge.

Logically, successfully establishing (2) will be a successful demonstration that (1) is false. Claim (2) will be the *black swan* Gettier presents to counter the popular belief that *all swans are white*. This work is a scrutiny of the way Gettier establishes claim (2). To prove (2), Gettier (1963) sets up the following scenario:

Following a job interview attended by both Smith and Jones, Smith has strong evidence to believe that:

(d) Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

¹ Yakubu (2016) critiques the manner of Gettier's application of the rules of classical logic in that second argument.

From (d), Smith deduces that:

(e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket.

It turns out, however, that even though Jones does have ten coins in his pocket, he is not the man who gets the job. Instead, unbeknown to Smith, he (Smith) himself gets the job and also unbeknown to him, he (Smith) also has ten coins in his pocket.

Under the circumstances, Gettier (1963, 122) declares:

In our example, then, all of the following are true:

- (i) (e) is true.
- (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true.
- (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true.
- (iv) But it is equally clear that Smith does not know that (e) is true.

If claims (i) to (iv) hold, then we have a situation in which an agent has a belief that is true and justified, and which at the same time is not knowledge. Gettier, then, would have proven claim (2) and consequently refuted (1). We now need to evaluate Gettier's arguments for claims (i) to (iv).

All the claims in (i) to (iv) pertain to statement (e), which contains a definite description. We cannot ascertain any of the claims without knowing the person that the definite description denotes. Thus, in proving the four claims, Gettier indicates the denotation of the definite description in each case. For better coherence, let us start with (ii), the belief claim, in examining how Gettier establishes each of the four claims. Claim (ii) asserts that the agent (Smith) believes some proposition. But exactly what does the agent believe? Saying that Smith believes that (e), is not enough, since (e) is only a declarative sentence and we cannot judge it until we know the actual proposition it is expressing. (e) says something about a person it refers to by a non-rigid designator. Whether Smith indeed believes what we think he believes depends upon what individual we think

the non-rigid designator represents. As we shall see in further discussion later, it is possible that Smith has no particular person in mind for the non-rigid designator, and that compounds the problem of ascertaining what belief (e) actually expresses. Fortunately, however, the context of Gettier's example is unambiguous as to what belief (e) expresses. Gettier explains that Smith believes (e) because he believes that:

(d) Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.

So the definite description – the man who will get the job (Φ) – in this case, refers to Jones. So Smith's belief (e) arises from substituting Φ for Jones in (d) to get (e). So, in the context of this Gettier example, the claim in (e) is a claim about Jones.

Gettier proves (iii), the justification for Smith's belief, by the following chain reasoning format (1963, 122): "if S is justified in believing P, and P entails Q, and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q." Then he adds (1963, 122): "Smith sees the entailment from (d) to (e), and accepts (e) on the grounds of (d)." So, in establishing the justification for Smith's belief, as expressed in (e), Gettier again points to the fact that the belief arises from (d). Thus, the definite description in (e) again refers to Jones for Gettier's justification claim (iii).

Now, let us look at how Gettier derives his truth claim (i). Gettier (1963, 122) premised his declaration that "(e) is true," upon the following: "unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket." As Gettier (1963, 122) subsequently states explicitly, "(e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket." In other words, Gettier establishes claim (i), the truth claim, by taking Smith to be the denotation of the definite description - (Φ) the man who will get the job. Let us keep in mind that Jones, rather than Smith, was the denotation of (e) when Gettier established the belief (ii) and

justification (iii) claims. To prove claim (iv), Gettier points to these conflicting denotations as grounds; asserting that Smith does not know that (e) is true, because Smith erroneously “bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket,” whereas “(e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket.” So Gettier points to the conflict between the “speaker’s referent and the semantic referent” (Kripke 1977) as the ground for his “no knowledge” claim (iv). However, given that we are dealing with a single argument and context, we ought to identify the appropriate referent and apply it consistently throughout the argument, rather than relying on one referent to establish one premise and then shifting to a different referent to establish a another premise.

3. Ambiguous Noun Phrases

In many subject predicate sentences, the object is denoted by description, rather than a rigid designator such as a proper name. Phrases so used to pick out the object in the subject of a declarative sentence are a subject of much discussion in the literature of analytic philosophy of language. Russell (1905, 479) refers to them as “denoting phrases” or “denoting complexes.” Strawson (1950) calls them “noun phrases.” Of particular interest is a specific category of them known as “definite descriptions.” They consist of the definite article followed by a noun or a descriptive phrase. For example, “the whale,” “the king of France,” “the man who will get the job” etc. Some classic articles have been published on the subject, including Russell (1905), Strawson (1950), Donnellan (1966) and Kripke (1972; 1977). There has been a lot of discussion in the subsequent literature as to how subtly or essentially these major thinkers on the subject differ in their views regarding the semantics of such noun phrases.

It is now widely recognized among scholars, that the noun phrases are subject to variable usage and certain pairs of alternative context-dependent interpretations have been proposed by various scholars. Russell (1905. 489) illustrates this with the following example:

“when we say, "George IV. wished to know whether Scott was the author of Waverley," we normally mean " George IV. wished to know whether one and only one man wrote *Waverley* and Scott was that man" ; but we may also mean : "One and only one man wrote Waverley, and George IV. wished to know whether Scott was that man ". In the latter, "the author of Waverley" has a primary occurrence; in the former, a secondary. The latter might be expressed by " George IV. wished to know, concerning the man who in fact wrote Waverley, whether he was Scott ". This would be true, for example, if George IV. had seen Scott at a distance, and had asked "Is that Scott?"

So, if a statement containing a denoting phrase can be understood in two senses, depending upon whether the denoting phrase has a primary or a secondary occurrence, we cannot shift between the two senses in a single argument.

Like Russell, Donnellan (1966) points out that there can be two possible uses of a definite description in the same sentence. As he explains (1966, 285):

A speaker who uses a definite description *attributively* in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description *referentially* in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing.

In Donnellan's illustration, suppose Smith is brutally murdered. Somebody remarks, "Smith's murderer is insane." This can be understood in two different ways depending upon the context. Suppose we just witnessed the gory details of a trial in which Jones is convicted of the murder. Under such circumstances, the statement "Smith's murderer is insane" will be referring specifically

to Jones. Even if it turns out that Jones did not commit the “murder of Smith,” the sentence still refers to Jones because he is the one the speaker and his audiences have in mind when they say “Smith’s murderer.”. This is Donnellan’s *referential* use of such expressions. On the other hand, if no suspect has been identified or arrested for Smith’s murder, then we have no specific individual in mind when we say, “Smith’s murderer,” and whoever uniquely fits the description is the denotation. This would be Donnellan’s *attributive* use of such expressions. In this case, the description, “Smith’s murderer,” is what we rely upon, primarily, to identify the person that is being called insane. This, I think, is equivalent to the instances in which, according to Russell (1905, 489), the denoting phrase has a primary occurrence. It would be a secondary occurrence in the referential use instances. Respectively, Donnellan says the definite description occurs essentially or non-essentially.

Donnellan’s attributive use of a definite description is what Kripke (1972) describes as “the logician’s” sense of the occurrence of a definite description. He writes (192):

Definite descriptions: phrases of the form ‘the x such that qx ’, such as ‘the man who corrupted Hadleyburg’. Now, if one and only one man ever corrupted Hadleyburg, then that man is the referent, in the logician’s sense, of that description.

Thus, in classical logic, “if you have a description of the form ‘the x such that qx ’ and there is exactly one x such that qx , then that is the referent of the description.” In other words, whatever fits the description is what we are referring to. However, Kripke also recognizes the other sense in which definite descriptions are used, such that, depending upon the context, the referent may not be the individual that uniquely fits the description. Citing Donnellan (1966), Kripke (1972, 193) describes it as follows:

You may say, 'The man over there with the champagne in his glass is happy', though he actually only has water in his glass. Now, even though there is no champagne in his glass, and there may be another man in the room who does have champagne in his glass, the speaker *intended* to refer, or maybe, in some sense of 'refer', *did* refer, to the man he thought had the champagne in his glass.

So, in a situation where the speaker's intention is clear as to whom he or she is talking about and the description is secondary or non-essential, we cannot ignore that context and take the abstract logical view of what the words mean. We need to respect the rules of natural language discourse (Grice 1975; Yakubu 2016). Having laid out these alternative uses of definite descriptions [i.e. They can be used such that they have a primary or secondary occurrence (Russell); they can be used in a referential/non-essential or attributive/essential way (Donnellan); and they can be used as a speaker's referent or a semantic referent (Kripke)], I will now show how Gettier blurs these distinctions in his argument, which results in the equivocation.

4. Gettier's Equivocation

Equivocation is a well-recognised class of fallacies which stems from "some confusion in the meaning of a key word or phrase used in the premises of an argument" (Damer 2005, 104). The reasoning flaw in such cases involves conflating the two senses of the same word or phrase. As Damer (2005, 105) describes it, equivocation "consists in directing another person towards an unwarranted conclusion by making a word or phrase employed in two different senses in an argument appear to have the same meaning throughout."

Thus, consider the following argument:

P1. Only man is a rational creature.

P2. No woman is a man

C3. Therefore, no woman is a rational creature.

If we symbolize the argument in predicate logic, we get:

P1. $(\forall x)(Rx \rightarrow Mx)$, where $Rx = x$ is a rational creature, and $Mx = x$ is a man, meaning a human being;

P2. $(\forall x)(Wx \rightarrow \sim Mx)$, where $Wx = x$ is a woman, and $Mx = x$ is a man, meaning a male human being;

C3. $(\forall x)(Wx \rightarrow \sim Rx)$.

The argument appears to be good, if we think that Mx in the second premise is the same as Mx in the first premise. The abstraction into formal logic masks the distinction between the two premises. That is what happens in Gettier's argument.

As we saw in section 2, in his arguments to prove a scenario in which the belief that (e), the truth of (e), the justification for (e) and (e) not being knowledge can all be true at the same time, Gettier shifted between Jones and Smith as the denotation of the definite description in the sentence:

(e) The man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket.

Shifting between two individuals as the denotation of the same expression in one argument fits the definition of the fallacy of equivocation. Gettier seems not to realize, in his analysis, that (e) is a different proposition (or belief) when it refers to Jones, from when it refers to Smith. Each proposition expressible by the declarative statement (e) gives it a different meaning. And shifting between the two meanings of (e) in the same argument is fallacious. As MacDonald and Vaughn (2016, 178) declare, "this switch of meaning always invalidates the argument."

In Gettier's defence, we could say that by shifting to Smith as the denotation, Gettier is invoking the *attributive* use or what Kripke has called "the logician's sense" of a definite

description. However, there are a number of problems with such a defence. The first is that, making the shift from one sense of the definite description to another, midstream in an argument, is what renders the argument fallacious, not because “the logician’s sense” of a definite description is entirely wrong. On the other hand, if Gettier avoids the equivocation fallacy by maintaining “the logician’s sense” of a definite description consistently, with Smith as the denotation in (e), then (ii) and (iii), the belief and justification claims, fail. This is because (d) is what grounds the belief and justification claims, whereas (e) with Smith as denotation does not arise from (d). Another reason why Gettier cannot claim to be using the definite description attributively is that the reading of (e), attributively or referentially is determined by context, rather than the prerogative of the author. And the context of this case does not fit the attributive interpretation (Yakubu 2016). As Gettier himself admits, Smith does not believe that Smith is ‘the man who will get job,’ and Smith does not believe that Smith has ten coins in his pocket. These are the subject and predicate terms of the proposition that makes (e) true, but Smith does not believe either of them. So, Smith does not believe the proposition that is generated by the attributive interpretation of (e). Consequently, the belief and justification claims fail under the attributive interpretation of (e).

Even though Gettier’s argument is generally accepted in epistemology, most epistemologists admit that there is something not quite right with the truth and justification for (e), which they admit has proven difficult to pin down. However, as it is becoming evident here, the elusive defect of the Gettier cases is in their argument form, whereas the epistemological analysis focuses on the semantics of the epistemological claims. Hetherington (2011, 178) writes in reference to beliefs such as (e) in the Gettier-type cases: “Each of these situations contains a belief which is true and well-even-if-fallibly justified by evidence, yet which epistemologists standardly regard as failing to be knowledge.” Prichard (2009, 13) expresses this general sentiment among

epistemologists, explaining that “[Smith’s] belief is true, albeit in such a way that it is unconnected to the justification he has for his belief.” Others have described it as true by luck or coincidence (Turri 2011; Zagzebski 1994; Schreiber 1987; Kirkham 1984). Epistemologists do not deny that “the truth of the proposition and Smith’s justification for believing the proposition are not only independent ... but that they are not even suitably related” (Bernecker 2011, 128). Note that the truth and the justification, whose conflicting contexts epistemologists are so perturbed about, are both premises in Gettier’s single argument and that entails the fallacy of equivocation. Further, epistemologists have called the truth of Gettier -type beliefs such as (e) as veritically lucky beliefs (Engel 1992; Pritchard 2005), which Bernecker (2011) explains as beliefs that are true in the broader world, but false in the close possible worlds in which the subject forms the belief. In other words, the belief is false in the given context , but fortuitously true in some unrelated context in the broader world.

All these descriptions allude to the fact that unrelated contexts are used to establish the justification for (e) and the truth of (e). Heathcote (2006) states this explicitly, saying that in the Gettier cases, “the state of affairs which is the truth-maker for the believed proposition is, in these anomalous cases, not identical to the state of affairs from which the evidence for the belief is drawn.” Some scholars have indeed, rejected the “Gettier-style” cases on this ground (Heathcote 2006; Hetherington 2011). Nevertheless, most epistemologists do not see the use of different contexts as something that invalidates Gettier’s argument. Gettier himself is not oblivious to this difficulty. In fact he sets it up deliberately and predicates his “no knowledge” claim upon that dubious situation.

However, in a more rigorous analysis, (e) has multiple possible meanings. And having one circumstance justifying the belief and a completely different circumstance making the belief

true involves shifting between different meanings of (e). We do not realize this if we conflate 'sentence' and 'proposition.' Schmidt-Petri (2002, 8) suggests that Gettier bases his argument on the thinking that we could make a judgement as to whether a sentence is true or not, distinct from (or independent of) whether we believe the proposition it expresses. However, as we shall see in the next section, propositions are the truth bearers of declarative sentences (King 2017) and when the subject of a declarative sentence is a definite description rather than a rigid designator, we cannot judge the truth of the sentence without knowing the individual the description denotes.

5. Sentence and Proposition

Strawson (1950) notes that in many analyses, there has been the tendency to take the sentence that expresses the proposition as something amenable to judgement without regard to the specific proposition that it expresses. We use sentences to express propositions or make statements. A single sentence may be used to express several different propositions. For that reason, a sentence that expresses a proposition, has no meaning, in itself, until we know which proposition it is expressing, out of the different propositions that it can be used to express.

So, in the Gettier example, there is the sentence (e) and the propositions it can be used to express. Gettier seems to conflate the two. A proposition (e) containing the definite description (f), where (f) refers to Jones, is different from a proposition (e) containing the definite description (f), where (f) refers to Smith. This idea that different propositions are generated by substituting referents was also discussed by the nineteenth century logician and mathematician, Bernardo Bolzano. In his *Theory of Science*, Bolzano (1837) suggests that when a non-rigid designator is used in the subject of a declarative sentence, we should not think that we are dealing with one and the same proposition in all contexts. Each time the denotation of the

definite description changes, a different proposition results, even though the wording of the sentence remains unchanged.

Similarly, Strawson (1950, 325) points out that “we cannot talk of *a sentence* being true or false, but only of its being used to make a true or false assertion, or (if this is preferred) to express a true or a false proposition.” For Strawson a statement is a meaningless sentence until we know what proposition it expresses. Thus, when I use the expression “the bachelor” to talk about Jones in a sentence, the proposition expressed is different from the proposition expressed when I use the phrase “the bachelor” in the same sentence to talk about Smith. If I shift the denotation of “the bachelor” from Jones to Smith in the same argument, I commit the fallacy of equivocation.

6. The Problem with the Russellian Reading

Russell (1905) suggested that definite descriptions are devices of quantifications rather than reference (Ludlow and Neale 1991). Some scholars who accept Gettier’s argument defend the claim that (e) is true by invoking a Russellian quantification of (e). Thus:

(e) The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket,

is expressed, by existential generalization, as:

$$(4) \exists x(Jx \ \& \ Tx).$$

That is:

(h) There exists, at least, one x , such that x gets the job and x has ten coins in his pocket.

What this does, is to obfuscate the context and move into the abstract, which will then give legitimacy to the interpretation of (e) such that anything that uniquely fits the description, whichever world we find that, is the thing that (e) denotes.

In fact, problems do arise when we invoke the Russellian reading to justify Gettier’s claim that (e) is true. In that analysis, (e) is true because there exists, by coincidence:

(g) Smith is the man who gets the job and Smith has ten coins in his pocket.

The problem with this way of claiming the truth of (e) is that Smith does not believe (g), because he thinks Jones is “the man who will get the job,” not Smith. (e) is true when it expresses the proposition (g), but in the Gettier context, (d) is the proposition expressed by (e), not (g).

Some scholars seem to suggest that Smith can simply believe (e) to be true, without believing (g), the proposition that is the truth maker of (e). That may be true under Donnellan’s attributive interpretation. However, does the context allow us to give (e) an attributive reading? This is where we need to inject some discipline into our analysis and to be mindful of context. Gettier’s analysis is about the doxastic state of a specified individual (Smith). All our discussion is about what is in Smith’s mind. It is not about *whatever wherever*. What does Smith believe? Is that belief true? Is Smith justified in forming that belief? Is that belief knowledge? The claim that we could render (e) as a Russellian quantification or Donnellan’s attributive interpretation, is stretched and in fact, inconsistent with the given context. Gettier states quite unambiguously that Smith expresses (e) upon the belief that Jones is “the man who will get the job.” So, when Smith says “the man who will get the job,” he is referring specifically to Jones. He does not intend it to refer to some unknown unique person that fits the description (see Kripke 1977; 2013). Invoking the *Russellian / logician sense* of (e) in the Gettier case is to ignore the context. The justification claim (iii) holds if we take Gettier to be deducing (e) in a referential sense from (d). But we cannot justify deducing (e) in the attributive sense from (d). We cannot pretend, given (d), that Smith is not referring to any particular individual when he says “the man who will get the job.” Consequently, Gettier would lose the justification claim in order to establish the truth claim in a Russellian way.

7. The Non-Russellian Analysis

So, we have discussed several ways the Russellian analysis is problematic in this particular Gettier case. First, it involves changing denotations of a definite description midstream in an argument, which makes the argument fallacious. Secondly, it is grossly inappropriate for the given context and a Russellian/attributive sense of (e) does not justifiably follow from (d). What then, would be the consequence for the Gettier case if we adopt the appropriate interpretation of (e) and apply that consistently throughout the argument? That is, if we take Jones to be the denotation of (e), given that (e) derives from (d) – Jones is the man who will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket. As we saw from Kripke (1972; 1977; 2013) earlier, in a context in which there is no doubt as to whom the speaker intends when he or she says, “the x,” then that individual in the speaker’s mind is the one denoted by “the x,” regardless of whether someone else uniquely fits the abstract logical meaning of “the x.” These are situations in which the definite description occurs only as a secondary description of what has already been established as the individual under discussion. That is, the definite description is not the primary means of establishing the referent. This is when the definite description is said to occur non-essentially. The secondary or non-essential occurrence of the definite description appears to be the case in this Gettier example. If we maintain that interpretation all through the argument, we avoid the equivocation fallacy.

The question then will be how that analysis affects Gettier’s claims (i) through (iv). Under this analysis, there will be no issue with (ii) and (iii), the belief and justification claims, since they were already established, rightly, with Jones as the denotation. However, Gettier’s arguments for the truth (i) and the no knowledge (iv) claims, will collapse, since they were grounded on Smith as the referent, which is no longer the case under the referential interpretation. The collapse of Gettier’s arguments for (i) and (iv) does not render them false automatically.

If we adhere strictly to Kripke's analysis of referential definite descriptions, the truth claim (i) actually holds, contrary to Yakubu's (2016) suggestion that the truth claim fails under the referential interpretation of (e). Yakubu's conclusion arises from a different consideration. He argues that (d), the proposition expressed by (e) is a conjunction of two claims, one of which is false, thus, making the conjunction false. Such an analysis gives equal weight to both conjuncts. However, in cases involving referential definite descriptions, the definite description occurs non-essentially and its truth value tends not to affect the entire statement.

In the referential interpretation, the speaker has a specific individual in mind and uses the definite description only to refer to that individual. In this case, even if the definite description does not fit the intended individual, it does not change the fact that he or she is the speaker's referent. And since we are interested in what the speaker believes, it is the speaker's referent we ought to use to judge the truth of the proposition the speaker expresses. Kripke (1977, 257) illustrates this with a good example. Suppose members of a religious community believe that their founder was the messiah and refer to him as "the Messiah." So, anytime they talk about "the Messiah," it is their founder they are talking about. Suppose the community commissions an author to study the life of the Messiah. According to Kripke (1977, 257):

... if someone other than the person intended were really the Messiah, and if, by a bizarre and unintended coincidence, the narrative gave a fairly true account of his life, we would not for that reason call it "historically true." On the contrary, we would regard the work as historically false if the events mentioned were false of its intended protagonist.

Thus, applying Kripke's explanation to our case, if Smith thinks Jones is "the man who will get the job," then Smith, in his mind, is talking about Jones when he says, "the man who will get the

job.” Even though that may be a mistaken description of Jones, whatever Smith says about “the man who will get the job,” he intends to say about Jones, not whoever actually gets the job. In this case for example, it is only Jones that Smith observed to have ten coins in his pocket and so, it is only Jones that he can justifiably claim to have ten coins in his pocket. Smith does not know that if any other person gets the job, s/he will also have ten coins in their pocket. So, as far as Smith is concerned, when he says, “(e) the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket,” he means to say “Jones has ten coins in his pocket” and that is true. So, the truth claim (i) holds. But in this case, for the right reasoning, rather than Gettier’s reasoning that involves an equivocation.

Now, let us analyze the “no knowledge claim.” If we adopt the consistent referential interpretation, the grounds upon which Gettier claims Smith has “no knowledge,” no longer apply. For, Gettier asserts a failure of knowledge by arguing thus:

it is equally clear that Smith does not know that (e) is true; for (e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket and bases his belief in (e) on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket.

However, Gettier’s claim that “(e) is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket,” is actually false. Under the referential interpretation, (e) is true, in virtue rather of the number of coins in Jones’ pocket. And Smith does indeed know how many coins are in Jones’ pocket. So, the reasons for Gettier’s assertion that Smith does not know that (e) is true (the no knowledge claim) no longer apply. So, Gettier’s argument that Smith has no knowledge collapses. Note, crucially, however, that the collapse of Gettier’s argument for the no knowledge claim does not logically entail the truth of the contrary (i.e. Smith has knowledge). The referential interpretation only

eliminates Gettier's grounds for asserting a lack of knowledge, thus, showing that Gettier's overall argument against JTB is not cogent.

8. Conclusion

I have used Gettier's (1963) famous ten coins argument to illustrate how shifting between the different denotations of a definite description results in the fallacy of equivocation. In that argument, Gettier needed to establish four claims regarding a certain sentence – (e) the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. He needed to prove that (e) is a belief of some agent (Smith), that (e) is a true belief, that the agent is justified in forming the belief (e) and that the agent has no knowledge that (e) is true. None of these four claims can be judged until we know the proposition that (e) expresses, which, in turn, depends upon whether we read the definite description referentially or attributively. In his analysis, Gettier appears to use the referential reading of (e) when he uses Jones as referent to prove that Smith has a justified belief. Gettier then appears to switch to the attributive reading of (e) when he uses Smith as referent to prove that Smith has a true belief. I charged that such a switch is fallacious and invalidates Gettier's argument. I then argued that the context of Gettier's example fits the referential interpretation of the definite description and that interpretation ought to be used consistently in that example. Following that proper analysis, the agent's belief and its justification are upheld. However, the grounds for Gettier's two other claims: that the agent's belief is true and that the agent has no knowledge, collapse. Thus, Gettier, in his ten coins example, fails to successfully argue that a justified true belief may not be knowledge. Of course, this does not imply, and I do not assert, that the contrary is true.

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