

EVIDENCE WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE?

Clayton Littlejohn

Introduction

According to Williamson, your evidence consists of all and only the propositions that you know ('E = K' hereafter). According to Comesaña and Kantin, some of the consequences of E = K are deeply implausible. If E = K is true, so is:

E = K1: The proposition that p justifies S in believing that q only if S knows p .

They argue that E = K1 is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases. Gettier cases are possible. It entails that a plausible closure principle suffers from widespread failures. Plausible principles tend not to suffer widespread failures. In §1, I shall explain why neither objection succeeds. In §2, I briefly explain why we ought to be sceptical of E = K.

1.1 Gettier Cases

In arguing that E = K1 is incompatible with the existence of Gettier cases, Comesaña and Kantin ask us to consider, *Coins*, one of Gettier's original examples:

Suppose that Smith and Jones have applied for a certain job. And suppose that Smith has strong evidence for the following conjunctive proposition:

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

Smith's evidence for (d) might be that the president of the company assured him that Jones would in the end be selected, and that he, Smith, had counted the coins in Jones's pocket ten minutes ago. Proposition (d) entails:

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

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

But imagine, further, that unknown to Smith, he himself, not Jones, will get the job. And, also, unknown to Smith, he himself has ten coins in his pocket. Proposition (e) is then true, though proposition (d), from which Smith inferred (e), is false. In our example, then, all of the following are true: (i) (e) is true, (ii) Smith believes that (e) is true, and (iii) Smith is justified in believing that (e) is true. But 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, whom he falsely believes to be the man who will get the job.¹

If this is a genuine Gettier case, and not just genuinely one of Gettier's cases, this is supposed to be an example of a true belief that is justified without constituting knowledge. The problem,

¹ Gettier (1963).

according to Comesaña and Kantin, is that Williamson cannot say that *Coins* meets the conditions necessary for being a genuine Gettier case. They argue as follows:

- (1) According to $E = K1$, no false propositions can constitute evidence.²
- (2) If no false propositions can constitute evidence, *Coins* is not a Gettier case.
- (3) *Coins* is a Gettier case.
- (C1) There are false propositions included in someone's evidence.
- (C2) We must reject $(E = K1)$.

While they say that $E = K$ is incompatible with the very existence of Gettier cases and note that this is particularly damning for Williamson who needs such cases to vindicate his claim that knowledge cannot be analyzed, it seems that their argument gives no warrant for accepting such a claim. At best, the argument shows that Williamson cannot say that there are cases in which an inferentially justified belief derives its justification essentially from a further false belief. Feldman observed long ago that you can construct Gettier cases in which a subject's justified belief fails to constitute knowledge without deriving its justification essentially from a further false belief because it is an inessential feature of Gettier cases that the subject harbors any mistaken beliefs at all.³ It seems that they must retreat to the weaker claim that $E = K1$ is incompatible with the claim that *Coins* is a Gettier case. It also seems that their conclusion is not particularly damning to Williamson who only needs there to be some Gettier cases to defend his claims about the analysis of knowledge. It is also perhaps worth noting that if Williamson is committed to denying that *Coins* is a genuine Gettier case, he is hardly alone in this. Some have argued that *Coins* is not a genuine case on the grounds that it conflicts with the principle that, "If an *essential* part of the reasoning from the evidence to the accepted proposition, *h*, proceeds through a false step, then acceptance of *h* is not justified".⁴ If Smith's belief that (e) is true is not justified, it is not a justified true belief that fails to constitute knowledge. Let's suppose, however, that this principle is false. Let's suppose that Smith's belief in (e) is justified without constituting knowledge.

Comesaña and Kantin claim that if someone is to say on Williamson's behalf that *Coins* is a genuine Gettier case, they have to show how it could be that Smith's belief that (e) is justified when Smith's evidence would consist only of propositions known to him to be true. Therein lies the rub, they say, because:

Now, everyone should agree that the proposition that Jones has ten coins in his pocket is something Smith knows, and that is *part* of what justifies Smith in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. Everyone should also agree that the proposition that the secretary said that Jones got the job is something that you know ... and it certainly plays *some* role in justifying Smith in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket. But for this strategy to work, it should be the case that *everything* that justifies you in believing that whoever got the job has ten coins in his pocket is a proposition that you know. $E = K1$ is the claim that a proposition *p* cannot be part of your

² Everything is controversial. For an argument against the factivity of 'knows', see Hazlett (Forthcoming).

³ Feldman (1974).

⁴ Pappas and Swain (1978: 15).

justification for believing something unless you know that p ...
And there is no argument that we can think of to the effect that
Smith's belief that Jones got the job plays no part whatsoever in
justifying Smith in thinking that whoever got the job has ten coins
in his pocket.⁵

What, if anything, can be said on Williamson's behalf? Two things. First, the argument assumes that the $E = K1$ causes trouble for Williamson because it implies that no false propositions can constitute evidence. Thus, unless we are prepared to say that false propositions can constitute evidence, we cannot accept this as an argument against $E = K1$. Second, we shall see that even if we grant this assumption, the objection assumes the following principle:

JE: The belief that p is part of what justifies S in believing that q
only if p is included in S 's evidence.⁶

These assumptions are open to objection.

Think about these exchanges. The first is between Scarlet and Green:

Scarlet: Do they have solid evidence against Mustard?

Green: Yes. They have all sorts of evidence against him; namely,
that he was the last one to see the victim alive, that his alibi did
not check out, that his fingerprints were on the murder weapon,
and that he had written a letter to his brother containing details
only the killer could have known.

Later, Peacock and Plum talk things over:

Peacock: How strong is their evidence against Mustard?

Plum: I've heard that the evidence is pretty strong. But, if
Mustard's fingerprints are not really on the murder weapon, his
alibi checks out, he was not the last one seen with the victim, and
there is nothing in his letters that actually indicate he had any
insider's knowledge of the killings, that is perfectly consistent
with the evidence they do have.

It seems that Plum and Green contradict one another. The natural explanation for this is that if it really is part of the evidence that Mustard's fingerprints are on the murder weapon, then it is true that his fingerprints are on the murder weapon. So, if that it is right, an assertion of the form 'His evidence is that p , that q , and that r ' entails that p , q , and r are true. So, unless Comesaña and

⁵ Comesaña and Kantin (forthcoming: 5).

⁶ It seems that Pryor rejects JE as well. The evidence of the senses might give us a justification for believing that we have hands and deduction might transmit this justification to the belief that we are not handless brains in vats. If the belief *that I have hands* itself became part of the subject's evidence, then the inferential belief *that I am not handless* would be absolutely certain. Yet, Pryor seems to think that neither belief ever becomes certain and need not in order to be justified. Thus, it seems that the justificatory status of the belief that I have hands does not depend on experience furnishing evidence that entails that I am not a handless BIV. It is precisely because Pryor thinks such evidence is never acquired through the senses that critics have argued that Pryor's dogmatism is in trouble. The evidence he thinks we have for believing we have hands actually serves to raise the epistemic probability that we are in certain sceptical hypotheses. If Pryor accepted JE, he would just say that the justified belief that we have hands gives us evidence that in no way raises the epistemic probability that we are in these sceptical hypotheses. Yet, he doesn't do this. He resists the temptation to 'go externalist' and say that the evidence of the senses is evidence we could not have had in a sceptical scenario and then rejects the Bayesian assumptions that his critics use against him. For a defense of an externalist modification of dogmatism, see Littlejohn (ms.).

Kantian can show that there can be false propositions part of our evidence, we should either say that *Coins* is not a Gettier case or say that its status as a Gettier case does not depend on the claim that the justification of Smith's belief that (e) is true does not depend on the proposition that (d) is true.

What about JE? There seems to be a pretty compelling objection to JE. Many of us are attracted to a certain kind of fallibilism about epistemic justification:

F: S can justifiably believe p even if $PSp < 1$.

That is to say, it is possible for S to justifiably believe p even if the epistemic probability of p for S on S's evidence is less than 1. The virtue of fallibilism about justification is that it seems the only option for the non-sceptical among us.⁷ It seems that anything we believe about the external world is believed on the basis of fallible grounds. So, the denial of fallibilism commits us to scepticism. However, if we think of epistemic probability in terms of conditional probability on a subject's evidence, it seems that we can show that there is no non-sceptical view that accommodates both JE and F. Thus, it seems that Smith could be justified in believing (e), but only if fallibilism is true. For *Coins* to be a Gettier case, it has to be that Smith's belief that (e) is true is justified. And, it seems that for Smith's belief that (e) is true to be justified, it must be that Smith's false belief that (d) is true is itself justified. If that belief is justified, however, then the epistemic probability for Smith's belief that (e) is true is not less than 1. That's because once Smith justifiably comes to believe (d), JE says that Smith's evidence now includes the proposition that (d) is true. Since the epistemic probability of Smith's belief that (e) is true is at least as great as the epistemic probability that his belief that (d) is true, Smith's belief that (e) is true is justified only if the epistemic probability of that belief's truth on Smith's evidence is 1. Thus, Smith's belief that (e) is true is justified only if we reject fallibilism about justification or deny JE. Since all non-sceptical views are fallibilist, it seems that those of us who aren't sceptics must reject JE. Those of us who are sceptics about justification will say that *Coins* is not a Gettier case because Smith cannot have justified beliefs about the external world.

1.2 Closure

If this much is right, then the proof that $E = K1$ is incompatible with Gettier cases rests on an assumption about justification and evidence that we have good reason to reject along with an assumption about evidence and truth that is highly suspect. I see no more reason for reject $E = K1$ than for rejecting these assumptions, and since these assumptions are independently problematic, the case against $E = K1$ is thus far far from compelling. Comesaña and Kantian allege that $E = K1$ is incompatible with the following closure principle:

JC: If S is justified in believing that p and S competently deduces that q from p , thereby coming to believe q , without ceasing to be justified in believing p , then S is justified in believing q .

Here is the argument:

According to $E = K1$, a belief that p can justify S in believing something only if S knows that p . But let us suppose that S is justified in believing that p but doesn't know that p ... a possibility that ... Williamson admits. If that is so, then S is not justified in

⁷ Dodd (2007) notes that $E = K$ is committed to the denial of fallibilism and thus engenders scepticism. The attack on JE was inspired by Dodd's attack on $E = K$. In Littlejohn (2008), I explain how Williamson can deal with Dodd's objection and note that Dodd's objection might actually cause trouble for Williamson's non-sceptical critics.

believing that q even if she is justified in believing (indeed, even if she knows) that p entails q and deduces that q on this basis without ceasing to be justified in believing that p —for S 's evidence for q is p , and S doesn't know p . Therefore, if $E = K1$ is true, then closure fails.⁸

One response is to simply follow Sutton's lead and make a minor modification to Williamson's view. If we simply identify a justified belief with an item of knowledge (something it is plausible to think Williamson should have done anyway), then this sort of objection cannot be raised.⁹ However, there is another response available. It is basically the response outlined above. $E = K1$ commits us to claims about evidence and justification, not beliefs and justification. $E = K1$ commits us to saying that false propositions cannot be evidence, not that false beliefs cannot generate justified beliefs. It doesn't unless we assume JE. But, as JE is incompatible with the sort of fallibilist assumptions that we need to say that we can be justified in our beliefs about the external world, Williamson can say that *what is believed* when S false believes p does not provide the evidence necessary for justified belief in q , even if whenever S 's belief that p is true is justified there is sufficient evidence for the justified acceptance of the obvious consequences of that belief. The basic idea is this. Competent deduction allows you to apply the evidence that supports the false belief that p to beliefs known to be consequences of that belief. The evidence sufficient for justifying the belief that p should suffice to justify the known consequences of that belief, and the proposition that p adds nothing to the evidence already had for accepting p . To suggest that p itself is needed as evidence for justified acceptance of q suggests either that somehow by coming to believe p the evidential probability of q increases (dramatically!) or could have been justified only if the evidence for believing p was so strong that the evidential probability of q could not be raised by the addition of any further pieces of evidence. That is why the suggestion is one we ought to resist.

2. Evidence and Knowledge

I'd like to close by suggesting that $E = K$ is false, but not for the reasons that Comesaña and Kantin suggest. $E = K$ is false because it implies that, necessarily, if A knows p and B does not know p , there is a proposition that is part of A 's evidence that is not part of B 's evidence. That is false. *This* is one of the things that Gettier cases call into question. If God sends A through real barn country and then sends B through fake barn country while seeing to it that the only differences between A and B 's internal cognitive homes and external surroundings have to do with the presence or absence of unseen fake barns, God can see to it that A and B have just the same evidence even if B does not know everything A knows.

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⁸ Comesaña and Kantin (forthcoming: 8).

⁹ Sutton (2007).

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