

# What is knowledge? The Gettier Problem

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# Outline

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Thus far, we have argued and assumed that if one knows that  $p$ , then

1.  $p$  is true (Knowledge is factive);
2. one believes that  $p$  (knowledge requires belief).

# What more than true belief?

True belief in  $p$  is then necessary for knowledge.  
Is it **sufficient** too?

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You know that  $p$  iff:

1.  $p$  is true,
2. you believe that  $p$ ,
3. you are justified in believing  $p$  (you have good evidence for  $P$ ).



# Gettier

But then Gettier came along and presented examples in which the subject has a justified true belief which, intuitively, fails to count as knowledge.

# First Gettier case

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3. Your belief that someone in the office owns a Ford is true because someone else in the office owns a Ford. Call this guy Haveit.
4. Since all your evidence concerns Nogot and not Haveit, it seems, intuitively, that you don't know that someone in your office owns a Ford.

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3. By chance, your belief is correct.
4. So again, you have a true belief that is justified. But, it would seem, no knowledge.

# The Gettier Problem

The **Gettier Problem** is to state what, in addition to or instead of justified true belief, is needed to have knowledge.

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3. You don't have infallible evidence that someone owns a Ford.

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2. It would make our account of knowledge immune to Gettier-type counterexamples.
3. But it would also make it next to impossible to have knowledge.
4. So it seems like a bit of overkill.
5. Most philosophers who have attacked the Gettier Problem have tried to find some solution which still allows subjects to know things on the basis of fallible, defeasible evidence.

# First kind of Solution to the Gettier Problem

1. One salient feature of the Nogot/Haveit Gettier case is that the reasoning that leads you to the belief that someone owns a Ford goes through a **false step**, namely the step where you believe that Nogot owns a Ford.

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2. So a possible solution to the Gettier Problem might be this:
3. Knowledge is justified true belief—where the reasoning your belief is based on **doesn't proceed through any false steps**.

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Feldman's case works like this:

## Feldman's case

You see Nogot waxing a Ford, humming Ford ad jingles to himself, and so on. On that basis, you conclude that someone in your office is waxing a Ford, humming Ford ad jingles, and so on. This belief is true. On the basis of that belief, you conclude that someone in your office owns a Ford. As before, Haveit owns a Ford so this belief is true.



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2. In this case it does not look like your reasoning proceeded through any false steps.

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2. In fact there is a sheep in the meadow (behind the rock, where you can't see it).
3. Here again you have a justified true belief that there is a sheep in the meadow, which fails to count as knowledge.
4. In this case, your belief doesn't seem to be based on any reasoning at all.

# Second Attempt at A Solution

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2. Well, in the Nogot/Haveit case, there is the information that Nogot is merely pretending to own a Ford. If you learn that information, that would defeat your justification for believing that someone in the office owns a Ford. So according to the present proposal, even before you learn that information, the mere fact that it is "out there" in the world shows that your justified belief that someone owns a Ford can't count as knowledge (even though it happens to be true).

# Second Attempt at A Solution

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2. The present proposal also explains why you can't have knowledge in another sort of case, first introduced by Gilbert Harman:

# Harman's case

## Newspaper

Jill reads in the newspaper that the president of her country has been assassinated. In fact, this story is true. However, the president's associates have mounted a campaign to suppress the story, and they've been broadcasting false reports on all the television stations that the president is OK, the assassin actually only killed a bodyguard. Jill is blissfully unaware of all this misleading evidence. The newspaper she read happens to be the only news source that's reporting the true events. All of Jill's peers, on the other hand, have heard the misleading TV reports and aren't sure whether or not the president was really killed.

# Harman's case

1. Harman claims that this is another Gettier case: he says that Jill has a justified true belief that the president was assassinated, but she doesn't have knowledge, because there is all this misleading evidence abroad in her community, which she has only managed to avoid by sheer luck.

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2. So far, so good. However, the current proposal also runs into difficulties.
3. Do we really want to say that if there's any potentially defeating piece of information out there, that's enough to block your justified true belief from counting as knowledge?
4. Consider a variant of Harman's newspaper case.

# A variant of Harman's case

## Variant

The president's associates are sitting in the TV studio, saying into the microphone "No really the president is OK, it was somebody else who got killed." The fact that they are saying this is a potentially defeating piece of information. If you were to learn that the president's associates are saying this, it would defeat your justification for believing the president had been assassinated. But suppose that in this case, unlike the earlier case, the associates' speech never gets broadcast to the public. (Maybe they're just joking around before the TV cameras start rolling.) So all the newspapers and TV stations carry the correct report about the president's assassination.

# A different, but relevantly similar case

## A different example

You see Tom Grabit hide a book underneath his jacket and sneak out of Bobst Library. On the basis of this, you form the justified belief that Tom stole a library book. As it happens, your belief is true. However, unbeknownst to you, Tom's mother was going around today telling people that Tom was thousands of miles away, and that Tom's evil twin John was visiting NY. The fact that Tom's mother said this is a potentially defeating piece of evidence. If you were to learn of it, it would defeat your justification for believing that Tom stole the book. However, as it turns out, it really was Tom who stole the book. Tom has no twin brother and his mother is a compulsive liar.

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3. In both of the preceding two cases, it seemed intuitively like you should count as having knowledge.
4. Yet in both cases, there was some potentially defeating piece of information "out there" in the world.
5. So the present proposal would say that you don't have knowledge. That is a problem for this proposal.



# A possible diagnosis?

1. You may have noticed that, in the preceding two cases, although there is some potentially defeating piece of information “out there,” you would only be misled by that information if you somehow managed to learn only part of the truth.

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2. The information about what the president’s associates are saying would only defeat your justification if you were ignorant of the fact that they were doing a cover-up.
3. The information about what Tom’s mother said would only defeat your justification if you were ignorant of the fact that she was a compulsive liar.
4. So you might be tempted to say:

# A possible fix?

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# A possible fix?

We'll say that you know that  $P$  iff

1. you have a justified true belief that  $P$ ,
2. and there's no true information "out there" in the world that would defeat your justification for  $P$ , were you to learn of it—unless there's also some second piece of information that would counteract that defeater.

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2. For if we amend the proposal in that way, then the proposal becomes incapable of explaining any of the Gettier cases.
3. For in a Gettier case, your belief always happens to be true, and that's a piece of information "out there" in the world that would counteract any evidence that tells against your belief.

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# Does that work?

1. To illustrate this, consider the original Nogot/Haveit case.
2. In that case, you have a justified belief that someone owns a Ford, and this belief happens to be true.
3. Now, there is some information out there—the information that Nogot is only pretending to own a Ford—that would defeat your justification for believing that someone owns a Ford.
4. But, since your belief that someone owns a Ford is true, there is also a second piece of information out there that would counteract that defeater.

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2. So according to the amended proposal, you would count as having knowledge.
3. But that's the wrong result. In the Nogot/Haveit case, intuitively, you don't know that someone owns a Ford.



# Does that work?

1. So it is difficult to explain why in some cases (the Nogot/Haveit case, the sheep-in-the-meadow case, the Gadwall duck/grebe case, Harman's original assassination case) the existence of some defeating evidence "out there" in the world blocks your justified belief from counting as knowledge, even though it is true;

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2. and why in other cases (the second version of the Harman case, the Tom Grabbit case) it does not.