A Proposed Counterexample to Klein's Theory of Knowledge

B. D. MOONEYHAM

In his essay "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge," Peter Klein addresses a famous problem in epistemology raised by Edmund Gettier. In short, Gettier challenges the traditional definition of knowledge—justified true belief—by providing counterexamples to the definition. Gettier shows that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge; in other words, there are cases in which someone is justified in believing a true proposition, but in which we would not say that the person *knows* the proposition in question. This presents a problem because a good, robust definition (of the kind epistemologists desire) ought to provide necessary and sufficient conditions of the item being defined. Since Gettier, many philosophers have attempted to formulate new definitions that are immune to these defeating counterexamples. This is what Klein attempts to do in his essay. However, I will offer counterexamples to show that not all the elements of Klein's definition are necessary conditions for knowledge; his definition is too strong.

I will first briefly summarize one of Gettier's famous counterexamples. Two people, Smith and Jones, apply for a job. Smith is justified in believing that Jones will get the job. Smith is also justified in believing that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. On the basis of these beliefs, Smith draws a further conclusion which is logically entailed by the first two propositions: the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. However, Smith turns out to be the one who gets the job, and by coincidence, Smith

B. D. Mooneyham recently completed a dual degree at Kansas State University, majoring in philosophy and economics. In the fall of 2009, he plans to attend law school, where he will study regulation and jurisprudence. His philosophical interests include epistemology, ethics (especially Kantian ethics), philosophy of law, and the history of philosophy.

also has ten coins in his pocket. On a common understanding of justification, Smith was justified in believing that the man who would get the job had ten coins in his pocket because it followed from two statements which he was justified in believing. Furthermore, this statement turned out to be true. However, it is unclear that Smith had knowledge in this case, so justified true belief must not be sufficient for knowledge (Gettier 121–3).

In his paper, Klein analyzes Gettier-type counterexamples like the one above in order to discover a common feature inherent in each one. By isolating a single aspect of the traditional definition of knowledge that leaves it vulnerable to these counterexamples, Klein intends to solve the Gettier problem. After examining several examples, Klein holds that knowledge does not obtain in these cases (even though justified true belief does obtain) because of a relevant true proposition that affects the "evidence" for believing another proposition. In the example above, Klein would argue that Smith was unaware of the proposition that the employer would hire him rather than Jones; had this been evident to Smith, he would no longer have been justified in believing that Jones would be hired.

In addition, Klein identifies a unifying principle illuminated by the Gettier-type counterexamples, which he calls the "felicitous-coincidence principle." This principle refers to situations in which the standard conditions for knowledge hold, but only by chance or coincidence. In Gettier's example, Smith, being unaware of the employer's real intentions, *happened* to be justified in believing that the man who got the job had ten coins in his pocket. This does not seem to be quite enough for knowledge. Klein relates the felicitous-coincidence principle to a passage in Plato's *Meno* in which Socrates argues that knowledge cannot be "true opinion" because true opinion can arise by chance, whereas knowledge needs to be grounded in something stronger than mere chance accuracy (472). Similarly, the felicitous-coincidence principle stipulates that justified true belief should not be attained by chance; otherwise, the belief in question does not qualify as knowledge. These reflections preface Klein's proposed solution to the Gettier problem.

Klein rejects one approach to solving the Gettier problem that involves strengthening the notion of justification to entail that one can never be justified in believing a false proposition. On this interpretation, Smith was not justified in believing that Jones would get the job because that statement turned out to be false. Neither was he justified, then, in believing that the man who would get the job had ten coins in his pocket. So, Gettier's example does not present a genuine case of justified true belief, nor does it undermine the traditional definition of knowledge. In spite of the simplicity of this response, few epistemologists support this strategy because it excludes many cases in which knowledge intuitively obtains,

even though the evidence for our belief does not strictly guarantee its truth. Klein, by contrast, leaves the notion of justification relatively unchanged. He instead supplements it in a way that strengthens the traditional definition enough to rule out the possibility for a felicitous coincidence. His definition includes the following four elements:

> S knows that p at t_1 if and only if
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> (i) p is true;
> (ii) S believes p at t_1;
> (iii) p is evident to S at t_1;
> (iv) there is no true proposition such that if it became evident to S at t_1 p would no longer be evident to S. (475)

Essentially, Klein adds an extra clause to the traditional definition of knowledge. The new clause suggests that knowledge does not depend merely on one's available evidence for a true proposition p, but relies on the non-existence of any *defeaters* for p. A defeater for p (or what Klein calls a "disqualifying proposition") is any true proposition which eliminates the evidence for p or offers prevailing evidence against p. By using the word "evidence" rather than justification (as in the traditional definition), Klein helpfully clarifies his concept of justification:

> A proposition is evident to S at t_1 iff it is more reasonable for S to believe p at t_1 (given his evidence for it) than to withhold belief in p and there is no more reasonable proposition for S to believe at t_1. A proposition may be evident yet false. It may be evident to S_1 but fail to be evident to S_2, because S_1 knows something that S_2 does not know, for example. In that sense evidence is person-relative, but it is person-neutral in the sense that, whatever makes p evident to S_1, that and that alone would make p evident to S_2. (476)

Having provided a clear definition of knowledge, Klein proceeds to examine various potential counterexamples which could discredit his definition. He quickly establishes that "there can be no counterexamples to show that the definition is too weak" (477). In other words, whenever all four conditions obtain, one will always have knowledge. I do not wish to argue that point here. Instead, I believe Klein too quickly dismisses the counterexamples meant to show that his definition is too strong. The last example that he considers, which he calls "the strongest that I know of" (478), needs further attention than what Klein offers.

To paraphrase Klein's example, Mr. Jones goes to M's house, where he is justified in believing that flowers are on the mantel. In fact, Jones sees real flowers, but M is a magician who frequently creates the illusion of

flowers on the mantel. In this case, there is a defeater for Jones's knowledge that *p* (where *p* is "there are flowers on the mantel"). The defeater is the proposition (I will call it *d*) that it is highly probable that M is creating the illusion of flowers. Klein argues that, even in the absence of any awareness of *d*, Jones does not know *p*. In order to insist that Jones knows that *p*, Klein believes we must 1) reject the felicitous-coincidence principle as a defeater for knowledge, and 2) concede an awkward description of Jones's knowledge that *p*. Since neither of these is a condition we want to accept, we should instead deny that Jones knows *p*.

The felicitous coincidence principle applies because "in this particular case, even though the standard criteria hold, they are not reliable" (479). Given M's nature as a magician, the odds were more likely that M would produce illusory flowers that night, which would make *p* false. If we deny that a felicitous coincidence discredits Jones's knowledge that *p*, then we must also deny the validity of the Gettier-type counterexamples; the felicitous-coincidence principle applies in both cases. Moreover, we are left with the following "awkward" claim that Jones knew *p* before he discovered that M is a magician; discovering this, *d* became evident to him, and he no longer knew *p*. Finally, Jones discovered that M was not playing tricks on the night of his visit, so Jones came to know *p* once again (479). Klein wants us to question how one could seriously give this account of Jones's knowledge.

But perhaps the supposed awkwardness of such a description of Jones's knowledge merely reflects the complexity of circumstances in which several facts present conflicting evidence for a given proposition. The magician counterexample illustrates a situation in which there exists a defeater for one's knowledge that *p*, but there is also a defeater for the defeater (the fact that M was not creating illusions that night). I suggest that such cases arise more frequently than Klein realizes, and that when these circumstances do arise, knowledge is still possible. A reworking of the magician counterexample clarifies this claim and helps to weaken Klein's charge of awkwardness.

Consider a case in which Jones believes his wife is at work. He is justified in believing this, because his wife told him she was going to work, she almost never lies to him, she left at the same time she always leaves for work, etc. Moreover, she is in fact at work during the time in which Jones holds that belief. However, unknown to Jones, his wife's sister arrived in town that morning, meaning to surprise his wife with a visit and spend the day with her. Jones is also unaware that his sister-in-law got a flat tire just as she arrived in town and was forced to spend all day finding a mechanic. Since Jones knows that his wife and her sister are very close and that they drop all their plans to spend time together, then if Jones had known *d*, that

his sister-in-law was in town, he would have probably retracted his belief that *p*, his wife was at work, because *p* would no longer have been evident to him. He would therefore no longer have known *p*. But then, discovering the additional proposition *e*, "the sister-in-law had car trouble," he would again believe (and know) that his wife spent the day at work.

Is it really implausible to understand Jones's beliefs in this way and to hold that, without any awareness of *d* or *e*, Jones would still have known *p* the whole time? If not, then Klein's theory is in trouble. Unknown propositions like *d* and *e* could conceivably occur often, but on Klein's theory we must always deny that one has knowledge in these cases. Consider another case in which Jones's wife works in the State Capitol Building. One morning, a bomber plans to call in a threat to the building. State policies dictate that the building be evacuated any time such a threat is received, so Jones's wife would have been forced to move across the street until the situation was resolved. However, before the bomber's plans could be realized, the police discover his intentions and intervene, preventing the threat. The proposition "a bomber plans to threaten the State Capitol Building" could be enough to make Jones's belief *p* no longer evident to him, but the police department's intervention prevented this proposition from entering Jones's mind while he was considering whether or not his wife was at work.

Moreover, these seem like the kinds of circumstances that never *would* enter Jones's mind, because he does not have access to that kind of information; and yet it seems reasonable to grant that Jones knows his wife is at work. Both of the examples with Jones and his wife suggest that there could often be possible defeaters for everyday knowledge claims, such that if we were made aware of the defeater *d* by itself, *p* (the proposition in question) would no longer be evident. Yet, in addition to defeaters there are often defeaters for the defeaters as well. In order for us to know *p*, and not merely to know that we know, Klein would require that none of these extenuating circumstances ever occur without our awareness. But clearly these kinds of circumstances do occur without our awareness. It follows that unless Jones is omniscient, it will be almost impossible for him to distinguish the days that he knows his wife is at work from the days that he does not, even when the fact of her being at work does not change.

This line of argumentation may be unconvincing to Klein. After all, is it not the same as saying that Jones will be unable to distinguish the days that he knows there are flowers on *M*'s mantel from the days that he does not, without consulting *M*? Klein would presumably have no problem with this statement. He examines a similar objection while responding to different forms of skepticism toward the end of his paper. The objection claims that "if the definition [of knowledge] were accepted, it would never be true that S knows that he knows that *p* because he could never know

that the fourth condition held" (480). However, these examples concerning Jones and his wife are not intended to demonstrate the impossibility of knowing that one knows *p*; rather, they show that Klein is overly optimistic in the expectation of how often his conditions for knowledge will obtain. His definition leaves out too many cases of knowledge to give us the kind of results we expect from a good theory of knowledge. In this sense, Klein's theory should be rejected on the same grounds that Klein himself rejects the attempts to retain the traditional definition. These attempts use an overly strong sense of justification; here Klein too uses an overly strong qualification for knowledge.

Returning to Klein's first argument against the magician counterexample, we are forced to abandon the authority of the felicitous-coincidence principle. Any case of a "defeater for a defeater" seems like a felicitous coincidence (e.g., the sister-in-law getting a flat tire), and we probably do not want to use the principle to dismiss numerous cases of seemingly ordinary knowledge. But this does not mean we have to reconsider whether the Gettier problem *is* a problem. Perhaps the Gettier-type counterexamples can be explained coherently using another common feature that would reveal the problems regarding the traditional definition of knowledge. Many epistemologists have in fact developed competing theories operating under different assumptions about how to fix the traditional definition. The fact that there are alternatives shows that we need not cling to the felicitous-coincidence principle as an essential explanatory guide.

In summary, Klein offers two reasons to reject the counterexample of Jones and the magician M. The first reason, appealing to the felicitous-coincidence principle, can be overcome by showing (as others have done) that this principle need not be decisive in solving the Gettier problem. This paper has been concerned primarily with Klein's second reason, which holds that accepting the magician counterexample involves the use of an awkward and unintuitive conception of knowledge. I have argued that this is not the case by recreating the conditions of the magician example with more plausible circumstances and showing that such cases are both perfectly conceivable and knowledge-preserving. Considering that both arguments against the magician counterexample can be overcome, Klein's theory fails to adequately defend against the objection that his criteria for knowledge are too strong. His fourth condition is not a necessary condition for knowledge.

Works Cited

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