MISLEADING DISPOSITIONS AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

E. J. COFFMAN
THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

ABSTRACT: Gettiered beliefs are those whose agents are subject to the kind of epistemologically significant luck illustrated by Gettier Cases. Provided that knowledge requires ungettiered belief, we can learn something about knowledge by figuring out how luck blocks it in Gettier Cases. After criticizing the most promising of the going approaches to gettiered belief—the Risk of False Belief Approach—I explain and defend a new approach: the Risk of Misleading Dispositions Approach. Roughly, this view says that a belief is gettiered just in case its unfortunate subject has at best just luckily avoided being disposed by his belief’s actual grounds to believe a wide class of falsehoods about his environment. I then show how this approach undercuts an influential recent argument that knowledge has no more value than certain subsets of its components.

A gettiered belief is a belief whose agent is subject to the kind of epistemologically significant luck illustrated by Gettier Cases (i.e., cases relevantly like those Edmund Gettier famously employs in his 1963). Provided that knowledge requires ungettiered belief, we can learn something important about knowledge by figuring out precisely how luck blocks it in Gettier Cases. This is so even if knowledge “cannot be analyzed into more basic concepts” (Williamson 2000, 33). To hope sensibly that reflection on gettiered belief will illuminate the nature of knowledge, we need only assume that “a modest positive account of [knowledge] can be given” (33). That we can give such an account is consistent with the view that “knowing does not factorize as standard analyses require” (33).

So our question is this: What, exactly, has happened to a gettiered belief? Precisely how does luck strike in a Gettier Case to keep a belief from being knowledge? In §§I–II, I’ll critically assess the most promising of the going approaches to gettiered belief—the Risk of False Belief Approach (Engel 1992; Pritchard 2004, 2005,
I’ll show that the main strains of this approach are both too strong and too weak. That will set the stage for my explanation and defense of a new approach (§III)—the Risk of Misleading Dispositions Approach. Roughly, this view says that a belief is gettiered just in case its unfortunate agent has at best just luckily avoided being disposed by his belief’s actual grounds to believe a wide class of falsehoods about his environment. I’ll conclude by showing how this approach to gettiered belief undermines an influential recent argument that knowledge has no more value than certain subsets of its components (Kvanvig 2003).

I. A LEADING APPROACH TO GETTIERED BELIEF

To get a clear view of the notion of gettiered belief, let’s revisit three classic Gettier Cases:

Deaf Ranger: An aging Austrian forest ranger lives in a cottage in the mountains. There is a set of wind chimes hanging from a bough just outside the kitchen window; when these chimes sound, the ranger forms the belief that the wind is blowing. As he ages, his hearing (unbeknownst to him) deteriorates; he can no longer hear the chimes. He is also sometimes subject to small auditory hallucinations in which he is appeared to in that wind-chimes way; and occasionally these hallucinations occur when the wind is blowing. In these cases, then, he has justified true belief but not knowledge. (Alexius Meinong, via Plantinga 1993)

Stopped Clock: There is the man who looks at a clock which is not going, though he thinks it is, and who happens to look at it the moment when it is right; this man acquires a true belief as to the time of day, but cannot be said to have knowledge. (Russell 1948)

Fake Barn District: Henry is driving in the countryside with his son. For the boy’s edification Henry identifies various objects on the landscape as they come into view. “That’s a cow,” says Henry, “That’s a tractor,” “That’s a silo,” “That’s a barn,” etc. Each of the identified objects has features characteristic of its type, . . . [U]nknown to Henry, the district he has just entered is full of papier-mâché facsimiles of barns. These facsimiles look from the road exactly like barns, but are really just facades, without back walls or interiors, quite incapable of being used as barns. They are so cleverly constructed that travelers invariably mistake them for barns. Having just entered the district, Henry has not encountered any facsimiles; the object he sees is a genuine barn. (Goldman 1976)

In classifying these stories (hereafter, ‘the Classics’) as Gettier Cases, I follow a well-established practice of so classifying a fairly wide range of examples. Pretheoretically, the Classics strike many of us as involving a common phenomenon: luck seems to block knowledge in much the same way across these cases. Treating such cases differently from the outset would risk needlessly multiplying the ways that luck can prevent knowledge, thereby making the task of theorizing knowledge unnecessarily complicated. Theoretical conservatism counsels us to group such cases together, at least until we have good reason to do otherwise.
Consistent with this inclusive attitude, though, I’ll also follow many others in recognizing an important constraint on an example’s being a Gettier Case: Gettier Cases involve a significant element of bad luck. More fully, a gettiered belief’s subject must have suffered some misfortune that negatively affects his belief’s epistemic status.  

In what follows, we’ll consider two accounts of gettiered belief—two substantive answers to the question how luck prevents knowledge in cases like the Classics. This section will introduce the most promising of the going approaches to gettiered belief: the Risk of False Belief Approach. After arguing that the main strains of this approach provide neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for gettiered belief (§II), I’ll explain and defend a new approach (§III): the Risk of Misleading Dispositions Approach.

Notably, complete accounts of gettiered belief are in shorter supply than you might think. One reason for this is that most of the leading post-Gettier theories of knowledge fail to directly imply a complete account of gettiered belief. That’s because most post-Gettier theorists have done little more than to simply endorse without substantive discussion what Duncan Pritchard (2005, 1) calls the epistemic luck platitude—the more or less vacuous claim that “knowledge is incompatible with epistemic luck.” This common “coarse-grainedness” of thought about the relation between knowledge and luck problematizes extracting complete accounts of gettiered belief from typical post-Gettier theories of knowledge. True, a typical post-Gettier theory of knowledge will yield an account of warrant—roughly, whatever must be added to true belief to get knowledge. But this doesn’t imply that such a theory will also yield a complete account of gettiered belief. For one thing, neither having warrant nor lacking it suffices for being gettiered. Any instance of knowledge is an example of a warranted, ungettiered belief. For a belief that’s neither warranted nor gettiered, consider (e.g.) a “lottery” belief that’s justified and true, yet falls short of knowledge. Such a belief lacks warrant (it’s true but not knowledge), yet isn’t gettiered. Moral: The fact that a theory of knowledge entails an account of warrant is compatible with the theory’s failing to deliver a sufficient condition for gettiered belief—and so, failing to deliver a complete account of gettiered belief.

A currently-thriving literature on different (benign and malign) ways that luck can figure in our attempts to gain knowledge was sparked by Engel (1992) and significantly advanced by Pritchard (2005). Engel’s paper introduces—and Pritchard’s book develops—what I call the Risk of False Belief Approach (RFBA) to gettiered belief. Writes Engel:

There is, I submit, an epistemologically relevant difference between a person who is epistemically lucky in virtue of the fact that, given her evidential situation, it is simply a matter of luck that her belief turns out to be true, and a person who is epistemically lucky in virtue of the fact that she is lucky to be in the evidential situation she is in but that, given her evidential situation, it is not a matter of luck that her belief is true. I call the kind of epistemic luck had by the former “veritic luck” because it is just a matter of luck that her belief is true and the kind had by the latter “evidential luck” because it is just
Engel identifies what he calls ‘veritic luck’ with the kind of knowledge-blocking luck present in Gettier Cases (69–70).

Recently, Pritchard (2004, 2005, 2007) has provided an impressive development and defense of RFBA:

We must . . . look more specifically at the sort of luck that affects this epistemic relation between the knowing subject and the fact known. We can express this type of luck in terms of how, even if all the relevant epistemic conditions on knowledge demanded by the epistemological theory in question are met, it is still a matter of luck that the belief is true:

(5) It is a matter of luck, given that the agent’s belief meets all the relevant epistemic conditions, that the belief is true.

We will call this type of luck “veritic” luck. So construed, veritic luck clearly constitutes one sense in which luck can be epistemologically significant. Indeed, this is the type of luck that is famously at issue in the Gettier counterexamples to the classical tripartite account of knowledge. (Pritchard 2004, 204–205)

What Pritchard calls ‘veritic luck’ occurs when an agent’s belief is true in the actual world, but . . . in a wide class of near-by possible worlds in which the relevant initial conditions are the same as in the actual world—and this will mean, in the basic case, that the agent at the very least forms the same belief in the same way as in the actual world . . . —the belief is false. . . . [I]t is veritic luck that is at issue in the counterexamples to the classical tripartite account of knowledge that were famously advanced by Edmund Gettier. (Pritchard 2005, 146–148)

Engel and Pritchard advocate the following basic idea: a gettiered belief is one that could easily have been false, given the way it was formed. In the next section, we’ll consider four main ways this basic idea has been developed. But we’ve already said enough to see that this approach can handle the Classics.

In Deaf Ranger, the ranger’s “wind” belief was formed on the basis of certain auditory experiences. Those experiences were unrelated to the wind: they could easily have occurred in the absence of wind. So, the ranger’s true “wind” belief could easily have been false, given the way it was formed. In Stopped Clock, the man formed his “time” belief after reading a stopped clock. The stopped clock no longer tracks the actual time of day. Accordingly, the man could easily have consulted the clock at a time when it was wrong. So, the man’s true “time” belief could easily have been false, given the way it was formed. Finally, in Fake Barn District, Henry’s “barn” belief was formed on the basis of a visual experience as of a barn. Given Henry’s surroundings, such experiences not only fail to reliably indicate the presence of a barn; they reliably indicate the presence of something that’s not a barn! Accordingly, Henry could easily have had such an experience when facing something that’s not a barn. So, Henry’s “barn” belief could easily have been false, given the way it was
formed. In sum, since the salient beliefs in the Classics could easily have been false given the way they were formed, the approach to gettiered belief championed by Engel and Pritchard correctly classifies those beliefs as gettiered.

Unfortunately, there are many gettiered beliefs that this approach fails to so classify. Further, the approach misclassifies certain ungettiered beliefs as gettiered. I’ll substantiate these charges in the next section, which will set the stage for my explanation and defense of a new approach to gettiered belief (§III).

II. PROBLEMS WITH RFBA

We’ll consider multiple versions of RFBA, starting with the one most easily extracted from Engel’s and Pritchard’s work:

RFBA-1 S’s belief B in P is gettiered iff B could easily have been false yet formed (held) in the same way.

Avram Hiller and Ram Neta (2007) have suggested two additional strains of RFBA:

RFBA-2 S’s belief B in P is gettiered iff B was formed in a way that could easily have given S a false belief about P (i.e., a false belief in one of P and ~P).

RFBA-3 S’s belief B in P is gettiered iff B was formed in a way that could easily have led S to believe a false proposition similar to P (for short, a false P-like proposition).

Notice that the right-hand side of RFBA-1 is logically stronger than the right-hand side of RFBA-2, which is in turn stronger than the right-hand side of RFBA-3. Accordingly, as we move from RFBA-1 to RFBA-3, the requirement on gettiered belief becomes weaker while the sufficient condition for gettiered belief becomes stronger. With this in mind, we can verify that all the above strains of RFBA get the Classics right. In §I, we saw (in effect) that the right-to-left direction of RFBA-1 handles the Classics. And we now know that the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief delivered by RFBA-2 and RFBA-3 are stronger than the one contained in RFBA-1. Accordingly, RFBA-2 and RFBA-3 will also render correct verdicts about the Classics.

Here’s how I’ll argue against RFBA. I’ll start with cases that show that the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief delivered by the above versions of RFBA are too weak. One of these examples—Benighted Wolf Spotter—will later be an important test case for my new approach. I’ll then describe two examples—Presumptuous Secretary and Southernmost Barn—which show that RFBA-3 carries too strong a requirement on gettiered belief. Since RFBA-1 and RFBA-2 deliver even stronger requirements on gettiered belief, these cases impugn them as well. Finally, I’ll apply my objections to the above strains of RFBA to a version suggested very recently by Kelly Becker (2008). The overall result: the main versions of RFBA fail to capture the notion of gettiered belief.

To begin to see that the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief contained in the above versions of RFBA are too weak, consider a case similar to one Alvin Goldman described (1976, 779):
**Benighted Wolf Spotter:** Sue always mistakes wolves for dogs. One day, Sue spots a wolf in an adjacent field. Sue forms the belief that there’s a canine in the field. This belief constitutes knowledge: Sue knows that there’s a canine in the field.

Since Sue’s belief constitutes knowledge, it’s not gettiered. Nevertheless, Sue could easily have believed (in the same way) a false proposition similar to [There’s a canine in the field]—e.g., [There’s a dog in the field]. So, there can be an ungettiered belief in P whose agent could easily have believed (in the same way) a false P-like proposition. RFBA-3 hasn’t delivered a sufficient condition for gettiered belief.

Notably, Benighted Wolf Spotter does not also impugn the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief contained in RFBA-1 and RFBA-2: we can safely assume that Sue could not easily have believed falsely (in the same way) with respect to [There’s a canine in the field]. But certain cases that involve beliefs resulting from “probabilistic” reasoning show that none of the features involved in the above strains of RFBA suffices for gettiered belief.

Consider a subject, S, who believes correctly—on the basis of “probabilistic” reasoning—that she didn’t win the (large, fair) lottery she entered (the drawing just took place, but the results haven’t yet been announced). S’s belief could easily have been false yet formed in the same way (though S actually lost, she could easily have won). But S’s belief is not gettiered. For one thing, it just doesn’t seem that knowledge is prevented here in anything like the way it’s prevented in the Classics. For another thing, this case lacks a significant dose of bad luck, and so fails to meet a plausible constraint on an example’s being a Gettier Case.

I conclude, then, that there can be an ungettiered true belief that could easily have been false while formed in the same way. Upshot: None of the above versions of RFBA delivers a sufficient condition for gettiered belief.

What’s worse, none of those accounts delivers a requirement on gettiered belief. To see this, consider the following case:

**Presumptuous Secretary:** An eminent historian, Hank, recently discovered that Abraham Lincoln was born not in 1809 (as most of us think) but in 1806. Hank writes a letter to his friend, Sandy, in which he asserts that Lincoln was born in 1806. When preparing the letter to be sent, Hank’s presumptuous new secretary assumes he made a careless mistake about Lincoln’s date of birth, and changes the text so that it says Lincoln was born in 1809. Unbeknownst to all, the secretary’s printer has just developed the following glitch: when directed to print a ‘9’, some other numeral besides ‘9’ is randomly selected and printed instead. As luck would have it, Hank’s letter gets printed as stating that Lincoln was born in 1806. When Sandy receives the letter, she consults it for the answer to the question of when Lincoln was born. Sandy comes to believe, justifiedly and truly, that Lincoln was born in 1806.

Sandy doesn’t know that Lincoln was born in 1806: her “Lincoln” belief is gettiered. But while reading the letter, Sandy could not easily have formed (in the same way) a false belief in a proposition similar to [Lincoln was born in 1806]. It’s not as though (e.g.) the text of the letter is now changing every several seconds,
or that Sandy’s eyesight has deteriorated to the point that she could easily have misread the relevant sentence. We can safely assume that the letter’s text has been perfectly stable for a considerable stretch of time; that Sandy’s eyesight is perfect; and so on. What this reveals is that your belief in P (at t) might have been gettiered even if (at t) you couldn’t easily have believed a false P-like proposition in the same way. So, RFBA-3’s requirement on gettiered belief is too strong. And we’ve seen that the requirements on gettiered belief delivered by RFBA-1 and RFBA-2 are even stronger than RFBA-3’s. Accordingly, Presumptuous Secretary shows all three strains of RFBA to be too strong.

For good measure, consider also the following variant on Fake Barn District due to Jennifer Lackey (2006, 288):

Southernmost Barn: [W]hile entering a Midwestern farming community on her cross country drive, Janice looked at the first barn that she saw, which was on the southernmost end of the field, and formed the corresponding belief ‘There is a barn’. As it happens, the barn she saw is the only real one, surrounded by barn facades that members of this community have placed in the field in order to make their town appear prosperous. However, as a matter of strict and unwavering policy, the members of this community always place their only real barn on the southernmost end of their land, since this is where traffic first enters their town. Moreover, thirty years earlier, Janice had lived in a house on the southernmost end of this field in the precise location of the one real barn. Because of her deep interest in her childhood roots combined with the brief period during which she can safely take her eyes off of her driving, she would invariably have looked at only the particular place in the field where the real barn exists.

Janice doesn’t know that what she’s seeing is a barn: her “barn” belief is gettiered. But given the details of the case, Janice couldn’t easily have formed (in the same way) a false belief in a proposition similar to [There’s a barn in the field]. Like Presumptuous Secretary, Southernmost Barn shows that all the above strains of RFBA are too strong.

Kelly Becker (2008) has recently suggested another version of RFBA:

RFBA-4 S’s belief B in P is gettiered iff B either (i) results from an unreliable process or (ii) could easily have been false given the way it’s held.

Like the previously discussed strains of RFBA, this one is both too weak and too strong. Our counterexamples to the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief delivered by RFBA-1 and RFBA-2 are also counterexamples to Becker’s proposal: RFBA-4 misclassifies various true beliefs resulting from “probabilistic” reasoning (e.g., “lottery” beliefs) as gettiered. And Southernmost Barn shows that RFBA-4 hasn’t delivered a requirement on gettiered belief: Janice’s “barn” belief is gettiered, yet it (a) resulted from a reliable process and (b) could not easily have been false.

We’ve now seen that none of the main strains of RFBA delivers either a necessary or a sufficient condition for gettiered belief. In light of these findings, we can conclude that the Risk of False Belief Approach has largely failed to capture the
notion of gettiered belief. The stage is set for an explanation and defense of a new and better approach.

### III. A BETTER APPROACH TO GETTIERED BELIEF

Recall what RFBA’s proponent says about the Classics. RFBA’s proponent will say that the agents in these cases exhibit the following “epistemically undesirable” feature: each formed the salient belief in a way that could easily have led him to hold a similar false belief. To introduce my alternative approach—the Risk of Misleading Dispositions Approach (RMDA)—, I want to highlight a different epistemically undesirable feature shared by all the indicated agents: each one is such that, due to sheer bad luck, he has at best just luckily avoided being seriously mistaken about his environment via grounds similar to his belief’s actual grounds.¹³ I’ll justify this claim after introducing some terminology that will yield a relatively precise statement of RMDA. I’ll then argue that RMDA gives correct verdicts about all the cases described above, and show how it accommodates the kernel of truth in RFBA. I’ll conclude by arguing that RMDA enables a defense of the intuitive idea that knowledge has more value than any subset of its components.

Some terminology. First, I need to borrow a notion from RFBA-3—that of a P-like proposition, a proposition (relevantly or nontrivially) similar to P.¹⁴ A P-like falsehood is, of course, a false P-like proposition. Now, say that the grounds of S’s belief, B, are the “inputs” to the process of belief formation (maintenance) that results in S’s forming (maintaining) B.¹⁵ Typically, the grounds of S’s belief in P will make S disposed to believe various P-like propositions. For example: I now believe that there’s a coffee cup on the desk. One of this belief’s grounds is my visual experience as of a coffee cup on a desk—this experience is one of the inputs to the process that results in my believing there’s a coffee cup on the desk. In virtue of having this experience, I’m disposed to believe numerous propositions related to [There’s a coffee cup on the desk]—e.g., [There’s something holding a beverage nearby]. Finally, I need to invoke the notion of G-like grounds, grounds (relevantly or nontrivially) similar to ground G.¹⁶ To illustrate: while my visual experience of my coffee cup is not relevantly similar to my visual experience of my computer monitor, the former is relevantly similar to the visual experience I’d have were I looking at a coffee cup hologram.

Now say that S at best just luckily avoided being disposed by G-like grounds to believe numerous P-like falsehoods just in case: if S avoided being disposed by G-like grounds to believe a wide class of P-like falsehoods, then his not being so disposed is just a matter of good luck (for S).¹⁷ Alternatively: S at best just luckily avoided being disposed by G-like grounds to believe numerous P-like falsehoods iff either (i) S is in fact disposed by G-like grounds to believe each member of a wide class of P-like falsehoods or (ii) it’s just a matter of good luck (for S) that he’s not so disposed. I can now provide a relatively precise statement of my alternative approach to gettiered belief:

RMDA S’s belief in P held via ground(s) G is gettiered iff
MISLEADING DISPOSITIONS AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE 249

(i) S at best just luckily avoided being disposed by G-like grounds to believe numerous P-like falsehoods, and

(ii) It’s a matter of bad luck (for S) that (i) obtains.

More fully: your belief in P held via ground(s) G is gettiered iff, due to bad luck, either (i) you are in fact disposed by G-like grounds to believe a wide class of P-like falsehoods or (ii) it’s just a matter of good luck that you’re not so disposed. In a (relatively long) slogan: to have a gettiered belief in P via ground(s) G is to have at best just luckily avoided becoming—via G-like grounds—an “anti-expert” (Egan and Elga 2005, 84) about subject matter like P’s (roughly, someone who holds mostly false beliefs about that subject matter).

We should immediately note two important features of rMDA. First, it honors the “significant dose of misfortune” constraint on Gettier Cases. Second, it captures the kernel of truth in rfBA. RFBA’s basic insight is that gettiered beliefs are held in environments that are somehow misleading for their agents. RMDA captures this insight. According to RMDA, a person holding a gettiered belief in P has, due to a significant dose of misfortune, at best just luckily avoided being disposed—by grounds like his belief’s actual grounds—to believe a wide class of P-like falsehoods. If a significant dose of misfortune has resulted in your having at best just luckily avoided badly misrepresenting your environment in this way, then your environment is obviously liable to mislead you—and so, is in a very clear sense misleading.

Can RMDA do better than rfBA on the cases described above? Well, for starters, RMDA correctly classifies the salient beliefs in the Classics as gettiered. Due to bad luck (constituted by the undetected onset of deafness and relevant auditory hallucinations), the ranger just luckily avoids being disposed by his “wind” belief’s actual grounds (which include relevant auditory hallucinations) to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [The wind is blowing] (the content of his gettiered belief). Had the wind kicked up slightly later, the ranger would have been disposed by the hallucinations to believe such falsehoods as [The wind is blowing], [The wind is causing the chimes to sound], and so on. So RMDA classifies the ranger’s belief as gettiered.

Due to bad luck (constituted by the clock’s undetected stoppage), Russell’s man just luckily avoids being disposed by grounds like his belief’s actual grounds (which include his visual experience of the clock) to believe numerous falsehoods similar to his true belief that it’s (say) noon. Had he read the clock slightly earlier or later, he would have been disposed by a very similar visual experience to believe such falsehoods as [It’s now noon], [It’s not yet 12:01], and so on. So RMDA classifies Russell’s man’s belief as gettiered.

Finally, due to bad luck (constituted by the locals’ undetected poverty and deceptive practices), Henry just luckily avoids being disposed by grounds like his belief’s actual grounds (which include his visual experience of the barn) to believe numerous falsehoods similar to his belief that there’s a barn in the field. Henry could easily be facing any of the numerous nearby fields that have only fake barns. Were Henry facing any of those other fields, he’d be disposed by a very similar visual experience to believe such falsehoods as [There’s something in the
field with a roof and four walls], [There’s something in the field that could shelter animals], [There’s something in the field with some good storage space], and so on. So RMDA classifies Henry’s belief as gettiered.

RMDA gets the Classics right. What’s more, RMDA can handle the cases I deployed to show that the sufficient conditions for gettiered belief proposed by the above strains of RFBA are too weak. Take the cases involving “probabilistic” beliefs first. RMDA entails that any case involving a gettiered belief will involve a significant dose of bad luck. But we’ve noted that examples involving “probabilistic” beliefs needn’t involve even a trace of bad luck. So, RMDA correctly classifies “probabilistic” beliefs as ungettiered. As for Benighted Wolf Spotter: given Sue’s inability to distinguish wolves from (certain) dogs, she could easily have believed (via her “canine” belief’s actual grounds) a false proposition similar to [There’s a canine in the field]—e.g., [There’s a dog in the field]. But we can safely assume both that the grounds of Sue’s “canine” belief don’t make her disposed to believe a wide class of falsehoods similar to that belief and that Sue’s having avoided such a predicament is not just a matter of good luck. Accordingly, RMDA properly classifies Sue’s “canine” belief as ungettiered.

Let’s turn, finally, to the cases that show that the requirements on gettiered belief proposed by the various versions of RFBA are too strong: Presumptuous Secretary and Southernmost Barn. Due to bad luck (constituted by Hank’s presumptuous secretary and her broken printer), Sandy has just luckily avoided being disposed by grounds like her belief’s actual grounds (which include her visual experience of the letter) to believe numerous falsehoods similar to her belief about Lincoln’s birth date. Had the broken printer printed any numeral other than ‘6’, Sandy would have been disposed by a very similar experience to believe numerous falsehoods about Lincoln’s birth date. So RMDA properly classifies Sandy’s belief as gettiered.

Now for Southernmost Barn. To begin to see that RMDA will classify Janice’s “barn” belief as gettiered, notice that it’s simply a matter of good luck (for Janice) that the one spot in the field she’ll survey is precisely where “strict and unwavering” community policy places the field’s one real barn. Call this combination of facts about Janice and the community the Lucky Combination. Repeat: it’s just a matter of good luck for Janice that the Lucky Combination holds. Notice further that certain small changes to the Lucky Combination would—or at least might—result in Janice’s being disposed, by grounds like her belief’s actual grounds, to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field] (the content of her gettiered belief). Slightly changing community policy might result in the real barn’s being elsewhere in the field. And this might, in turn, result in Janice’s believing [There’s a barn in that part of the field] while looking at a fake. Again, Janice would be disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field]. Or suppose instead that we slightly modify Janice, so that she might look elsewhere in the field. This too might result in Janice’s believing [There’s a barn in that part of the field] while looking at a fake. Again, Janice would be disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field].
So: it’s just a matter of luck (for Janice) that the Lucky Combination holds. And certain small changes to the Lucky Combination would—or at least might—result in Janice’s being disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field] (the content of her gettiered belief). These facts strongly suggest it’s just a matter of luck that Janice has avoided being disposed, by grounds like her “barn” belief’s actual grounds, to believe a wide class of falsehoods similar to her “barn” belief. Note that I’ve moved from

It’s just a matter of luck that the Lucky Combination holds

and

Certain small changes to the Lucky Combination would—or at least might—result in Janice’s being disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field]

to

It’s just a matter of luck that Janice isn’t disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field].

Here’s a first pass at a general principle about luck that would license this move:

If it’s just a matter of luck for you that a certain combination of facts, \( F \), holds and certain slight changes to \( \bar{F} \) might falsify a certain truth, \( T \), then it’s just a matter of luck for you that \( T \).

No doubt, this principle could use some chisholming. Fortunately, though, present purposes don’t require a perfectly chisholmed sufficient condition for luck. All I need here is the following claim: some or other plausible sufficient condition for luck—similar to the one just presented—will combine with relevant features of Southernmost Barn to imply that it’s just a matter of luck that Janice isn’t disposed, by grounds like her “barn” belief’s actual grounds, to believe a wide class of falsehoods similar to [There’s a barn in the field].

We’re now positioned to see that RMDA correctly classifies Janice’s “barn” belief as gettiered. I spent the last two paragraphs arguing that Janice has just luckily avoided being disposed (by grounds like her belief’s actual grounds) to believe numerous false propositions similar to [There’s a barn in the field]. And this fact is, for Janice, a matter of bad luck—constituted by the locals’ undetected poverty and resulting deceptive practices. Accordingly, RMDA entails that Janice’s “barn” belief is gettiered.

The upshot of the last several paragraphs is this: RMDA fares much better on the various cases described above than do the main versions of RFBA. In light of this fact, I submit that RMDA is a much more promising approach to gettiered belief than is RFBA. Of course, one can be no more than very cautiously optimistic about the long-term prospects of any substantive account of gettiered belief. That said, I believe that the approach to gettiered belief I’ve proposed stands to shed considerable light on both the nature and—perhaps somewhat surprisingly—the value of knowledge. As for the nature of knowledge, my approach yields an illuminating requirement on knowledge: you know proposition \( P \) via ground(s) \( G \) only if you haven’t suffered bad luck in virtue of which you’ve at best just luckily avoided
being seriously mistaken, via G-like grounds, about a wide class of P-like truths. Alternatively (and more concisely): You know P via ground(s) G only if you haven’t \textit{at best} just luckily avoided becoming—via grounds like G—an “anti-expert” about subject matter like P’s.\textsuperscript{20} As for the value of knowledge, the approach to gettiered belief I’ve proposed undermines an influential recent argument that knowledge is no more valuable than a certain subset of its constituents.\textsuperscript{21} I’ll close by explaining this important point.

Jonathan Kvanvig (2003) has argued that knowledge is no more valuable than a certain subset of its constituents—viz., subjectively justified, intellectually virtuous true belief.\textsuperscript{22} A crucial premise in Kvanvig’s argument is that the alleged greater value of knowledge over any subset of its components does not derive from the respective value of those components themselves. I reconstruct Kvanvig’s argument for this crucial premise as follows: \textsuperscript{23}

(P1) If the alleged greater value of knowledge over any subset of its components derives from the respective value of each of its components, \textit{then} the property of \textit{being ungettiered} has some value independent of the value of knowledge.\textsuperscript{24}

(P2) The property of \textit{being ungettiered} does not have value that is independent of the value of knowledge.

(C) The alleged greater value of knowledge over any subset of its components does not derive from the respective value of each of its components.

Call this the \textit{No Derivation Argument} (NDA). Kvanvig’s justification for P2 of the NDA is worth quoting at length:

[Extant approaches to the Gettier problem] offer something of value that might be used to explain the value of knowledge, but each such approach faces immediate difficulty concerning the nature of knowledge. Counter-examples to the initial formulation of the approach force alterations in the approach, and the alterations are guided exclusively by concern over the nature of knowledge, resulting in emendations of the original suggestion that appear entirely ad hoc from the point of view focusing on the question of the value of knowledge. That is, if we devote attention not only to the adequacy of such approaches in terms of the nature of knowledge but also to the adequacy of such approaches in terms of the value of knowledge, no such emendations have much to recommend them. As the prospects rise for providing a counterexample-free account of the nature of knowledge, the prospects sink for providing an account of knowledge in terms of the value of its constituents . . . . Extant approaches to the Gettier problem offer no basis for explaining the value of knowledge over and above the value of true belief, subjective justification, and the display of virtuous intellects. The failure of these approaches gives a strong inductive argument for thinking that success is unlikely. (2003, 138–139)

I’ll now use RMDA to undercut P2 of the NDA, thereby disabling Kvanvig’s overall argument against knowledge’s being uniquely valuable.
RMDA equates a belief in P’s being ungettiered with its being held by an agent who hasn’t suffered bad luck in virtue of which she has at best just luckily avoided being disposed, by grounds like her belief’s actual grounds, to make serious mistakes about P-like truths. Obviously, if you add to subjectively justified, virtuously held true belief a condition involving the property RMDA identifies with being ungettiered, you get a much more tenable approach to the nature of knowledge. So, provided that Kvanvig’s support for P2 is correct, if you augment an account of knowledge in terms of subjectively justified, virtuously held true belief with a requirement involving the feature RMDA identifies with gettiered belief, you’ll thereby have problematized the task of explaining how knowledge has more value than any subset of its components.

But that’s not what happens when we make such an addition. Instead, placing such a requirement on knowledge actually enables a plausible explanation of the greater value of knowledge over any subset of its components. This is because the property that RMDA equates with being ungettiered is intuitively valuable (independent of the value of knowledge). Intuitively, it’s a good thing to have not suffered bad luck in virtue of which you’ve at best just luckily avoided being seriously mistaken about a wide class of facts similar to a particular true belief of yours. Alternatively: it’s a good thing to have not suffered bad luck in virtue of which you’ve at best just luckily avoided becoming an “anti-expert” on subject matter similar to that of some true belief of yours. Analogously, it’s a good thing to have not suffered bad luck in virtue of which you’ve at best just luckily avoided performing numerous impermissible acts similar to certain of your permissible acts. In general, while there’s value in having avoided a certain kind of harm, there’s also value in not having been put “in harm’s way” by a stroke of bad luck.

So, my approach to gettiered belief helps to explain both the nature of knowledge and the greater value of knowledge over mere subjectively justified, virtuously held true belief. This counters Kvanvig’s suggestion—on behalf of P2 of the NDA—that there’s a strong negative correlation between an account of gettiered belief’s helping to explain the nature of knowledge, on the one hand, and the unique value of knowledge, on the other. Hence, my approach to gettiered belief serves to undercut P2 of the NDA, and so to undermine Kvanvig’s overall argument for the conclusion that knowledge has no more value than a certain subset of its components. In this way, RMDA helps advance our understanding of both the nature and the value of knowledge.

ENDNOTES

3. Proponents of the so called Credit Theory of Knowledge (see Greco 2003; Riggs 2007; Sosa 2007; and Zagzebski 1999) present the main alternative to the Risk of False Belief Approach. Credit Theorists maintain that “you do not get to the truth in [a Gettier case] because of your virtuous motives and acts” (Zagzebski 1999, 111). Roughly, then, a Credit
Theorist will hold that a gettiered belief is one that fails to count as an achievement or accomplishment for which its agent deserves credit. For compelling arguments that the Credit Theory delivers neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for gettiered belief, see Lackey 2007 and 2009.

4. Shope 1983 provides detailed explanation and assessment of several leading post-Gettier accounts of knowledge.

5. Suppose you hold a true belief, B, in proposition P. If B could easily have been false yet held in the same way, then you hold B in a way that could easily have given you a false belief about P. But the converse is false: even if you hold B in a way that could easily have given you a false belief about P, it may be that you could not easily have held a false belief in P itself (perhaps P is nomologically or even metaphysically necessary). So, the right-hand side of RFBA-1 is stronger than the right-hand side of RFBA-2. Further, if you hold B in a way that could easily have given you a false belief about P, then you hold B in a way that could easily have given you a false belief in a P-like proposition (both P and ~P are similar to P). But the converse is false: the fact that you believe P in a way that could easily have given you a false belief in a P-like proposition doesn’t entail that the way you believe P could easily have given you a false belief about P (P and ~P aren’t the only P-like propositions)

6. This case is due to Jennifer Lackey 2006, 288.

7. Here and elsewhere, ‘[P]’ abbreviates ‘the proposition that P.’

8. On the (underappreciated) difference between “probabilistic” and “nondeductive” inference, see §4.4 of Sutton 2007.

9. Indeed, some theorists (e.g., Hawthorne 2004) allow that you could know you’ve lost the lottery.

10. It almost goes without saying that while winning the lottery is a stroke of good luck, losing the lottery is not a stroke of bad luck (you were almost certain to lose).

11. Suppose we modify Presumptuous Secretary as follows: In an effort to impart knowledge of Lincoln’s real birth date to all his acquaintances, Hank has recently sent many relevant letters from his office. Almost all of these letters went through Hank’s presumptuous secretary, who always changes the date to 1809. The one letter that didn’t go through Hank’s secretary went directly to Sandy from Hank himself. Many theorists will think Sandy knows Lincoln’s real birth date (cf., Gendler and Hawthorne 2005, 346–347). What’s important to see is that such a knowledge ascription is compatible with the ignorance ascription to which this note is appended: there’s an epistemologically significant difference between the cases. In Presumptuous Secretary, Sandy’s true belief about Lincoln’s birth date is clearly not grounded directly in testimony from knowledgeable Hank, as it is in the modified case described in this note.

12. Becker writes: “Eliminating veritic luck . . . requires two distinct conditions . . . : first, a process reliabilist condition construed sufficiently generally to be applicable to more than one belief token, and second, a condition that typically applies to specific belief tokens” (2008, 353)

Following those who suggested RFBA-3 (Hiller and Neta 2007, 311), I leave the notion of \textit{relevant similarity among propositions} unanalyzed.

I want to remain neutral here on issues germane to the “Internalism/Externalism” debate in epistemology. Accordingly, I allow a wide range of mental and non-mental events and states to count as “grounds.”

I leave the notion of \textit{relevant similarity among belief grounds} unanalyzed. Notably, this won’t put my account at a disadvantage relative to the versions of RFBA considered above, since they take as primitive the notion of \textit{relevant similarity among ways of holding (or, bases of) a belief}. (For an influential discussion and attempted analysis of the notion of \textit{relevant similarity among perceptual grounds}, see §II of Goldman 1976.)

Two notes in one. First, here’s a slightly more precise statement of the consequent: It’s just a matter of good luck (for S) that G-like grounds haven’t made S disposed to believe each member of a wide class of P-like falsehoods. Second, for a very helpful discussion of dispositions to believe and their relation to dispositional and occurrent beliefs, see Audi 1994.

A few examples: [There’s a barn in that part of the field], [There’s something with four walls and a roof in that part of the field], [There’s something that has some good storage space in that part of the field], [There’s something that could shelter animals in that part of the field], and so on.

I’ll here limit myself to observing that the principle becomes much more plausible if we add the following claims to the antecedent: (i) You’re not free to do anything that would definitely prevent a relevant change to F; and (ii) T’s obtaining holds some significance for you. The result is this:

\textit{If} it’s just a matter of luck for you that a certain combination of facts, F, holds \textit{and} certain small changes to F might falsify a certain truth, T, \textit{and} T’s obtaining holds some significance for you, \textit{and} you’re not free to do anything that would definitely prevent relevant changes to F; \textit{then} it’s just a matter of luck for you that T.

We can safely assume that in Southernmost Barn, Janice meets this conditional’s antecedent with respect to the Lucky Combination (F) and the fact that she’s not disposed, by grounds like her belief’s actual grounds, to believe a wide class of falsehoods similar to her “barn” belief (T).

Notably, my approach also yields plausible verdicts about so called \textit{Harman-style cases}. Here’s perhaps the most (in)famous such case:

A political leader is assassinated. His associates, fearing a coup, decide to pretend that the bullet hit someone else. On Nationwide television they announce that an assassination attempt has failed to kill the leader but has killed a secret service man by mistake. However, before the announcement is made, an enterprising reporter on the scene telephones the real story to his newspaper, which has included the story in its final edition. Jill buys a copy of that paper and reads the story of the assassination. What she reads is true, and so are her assumptions about how the story came to be in the paper. (Harman 1973, 143)

As others have pointed out (e.g., Pritchard 2005, 168–173), this description of the case omits various important details. As a result, we can amplify it so as to elicit in many the intuition that Jill knows the leader was assassinated; but there are alternative readings that will elicit in many the intuition that Jill doesn’t know. The important point for present purposes is this: for
any reading on which it’s plausible to think Jill knows, my approach to gettiered belief will properly classify Jill’s belief as ungettiered. On any such reading, Jill will be intellectually virtuous enough to make the following counterfactual true (cf. Pritchard 2005, 171–172): if Jill were to become aware of subsequent misleading reports, she’d be disposed to suspend judgment on propositions similar to [The leader was assassinated] (rather than becoming disposed to disbelieve such propositions). So, assuming a reading on which Jill knows, it’s not the case that Jill has (later on) just luckily avoided being disposed by very similar grounds to believe numerous falsehoods similar to [The leader was assassinated]. What’s at least arguable is that Jill has (later on) just luckily avoided being disposed by similar grounds to suspend judgment on numerous truths similar to [The leader was assassinated]. Accordingly, RMDA properly classifies Jill’s knowledge in such cases as ungettiered.

21. It’s worth noting that my general approach retains this undercutting power even if the particular version of it I’ve argued for turns out to be vulnerable to counterexample.

22. The claim that knowledge requires subjectively justified, virtuously held belief is not essential to Kvanvig’s argument. Indeed, in making this assumption, he’s in effect “stacking the deck” in favor of his opponents—those wishing to maintain that the value of knowledge is just a function of the values of its constituents.

23. See chapter 5 of Kvanvig 2003 for his statement and defense of this argument.

24. Question: Why must being ungettiered have value that’s independent of the value of knowledge, given P1’s antecedent? Answer: If the value of being ungettiered is parasitic on the value of knowledge, then knowledge helps determine the value of some of its constituents. But then P1’s antecedent is false: the value of knowledge does not itself derive entirely from the respective value of each of its constituents.

25. I here sketch an argument by analogy from a premise concerning a moral good to a conclusion concerning an epistemic good. Such arguments are by no means unheard of; some even enjoy widespread acceptance. Consider, e.g., the widely accepted argument by analogy from the premise that your act A’s being morally justified is compatible with your lacking the ability to justify A to others, to the conclusion that your belief B’s being epistemically justified is compatible with your lacking the ability to justify B to others. For such an argument, see (among others) Alston 1989; and Audi 1993.

26. Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne, Michael DePaul, Nathan King, John Turri, and some anonymous referees for very helpful discussion of and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


