

Nozick and Gettier-style Problems: Reviewing the Sensitivity Condition

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Abstract. This essay explores the challenges of analyzing knowledge by focusing on the Gettier problem and the notion of sensitivity. The Gettier problem highlights that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. Sensitivity is introduced as a condition to address Gettier cases by requiring that a belief tracks the truth of the proposition. However, sensitivity clashes with the concept of closure that states knowledge being closed under entailment. This creates a dilemma: giving up sensitivity or closure. The essay argues for rejecting sensitivity because it has more problems than closure. First, even without closure, it's difficult to reconcile everyday knowledge with the limitations imposed by sensitivity. Second, sensitivity struggles to address all Gettier cases. Finally, a modified Gettier recipe is presented to demonstrate how sensitivity is vulnerable to counterexamples. The essay concludes that both attempts to revise Nozick's conditions of knowledge with sensitivity and the traditional project of analyzing knowledge in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions face significant challenges.

Keywords: Nozick, Gettier problems, sensitivity condition

1. Introduction

The proposal of a condition of sensitivity to qualify knowledge in addition to the conventional approach of justified true beliefs as knowledge arose as a reaction to the objection posed by Gettier cases. Briefly, the cases spell out scenarios where it is said that to hold a justified true belief in something that nevertheless intuitively does not qualify as knowledge. For instance, if a person saw a poster of the Eiffel Tower in Paris that they mistook for the Eiffel Tower, one cannot say that they knew the Eiffel Tower was there. But if the tower happens to be located behind the poster and blocked by it, then their belief that "Eiffel Tower is right there" is both justified and true, but clearly not knowledge.

The condition of sensitivity addresses the epistemic luck involved in Gettier cases to reform the conditions for knowledge. The condition can be stated as follows: “

An agent's belief that p is a sensitive belief if and only if, if p were false, the agent would then not believe that p.”

The sensitivity condition posed a counterfactual relation where the agent's sensitive knowledge of a proposition must rest on the truth of the proposition, not being a product of contingent circumstances. Referring back to the earlier example, if the Eiffel Tower were not, for purely contingent and lucky reasons, behind the poster, then they would still believe that the Tower is right there. This is not tracked in the classic justified true belief conditions of knowledge but does violate the sensitivity

condition. This then allows a valid analysis of knowledge in Gettier cases where the agent wrongly believes something that would not have been believed if it had been otherwise.

2. Sensitivity

Sensitivity seems to provide a robust account of conditions for knowledge that is also simple and intuitive to accept. However, one of the major caveats of sensitivity is that it clashes with the concept of epistemic closure, characterized by the closure principle. The exact content of the closure principle has received much debate, and arguing for one version over others lies beyond the scope of this essay. Therefore, it is important to look at the one provided by Neta [1], namely the following: “If, while knowing p , the agent believes q since the agent knows that p entails q , then the agent knows q .”

To put it more simply, epistemic closure captures the thought about knowledge that one knows anything that is known to be logically entailed by something that one already knew. For instance, I knew that “Steven owns a car.” Since this proposition knowably entails “Steven owns a vehicle,” it follows that I knew that as well.

It is easier to accept the closure principle since it explains why people can infer knowledge from existing knowledge [2]. And even in odd cases where a person knows “vehicles are not a fabricated concept” from “Steven owns a vehicle,” this inference can be passed off as an underlying supposition that people rarely make explicit in their thought processes due to how presupposed it is. And the aforementioned very rough sketch of the closure principle can be improved upon to meet other tricky cases [3]. The point here is that people tend to believe at least epistemic closure exists and at least some accounts of closure principles are true.

In the previous Eiffel Tower example, it is already evident that the agent’s belief in a proposition tracks the truth of that proposition. If the tower was there, then the agent will believe p (the Eiffel tower was there), and vice versa. Any other exception, such as the one caused by the poster, disqualifies the belief from becoming knowledge. But consider a case similar to what Nozick [3] discussed: the agent has a belief that they are not being hallucinated by a drug. If this proposition is false, as in, they are being drugged to believe their mental clarity, then it seems like the agent’s belief no longer tracks the truth of that belief. It follows that this belief fails the check of the sensitivity condition.

3. Epistemic closure

This then creates a problem for the aforementioned concept of epistemic closure. It seems reasonable that the proposition “I am not being hallucinated” is entailed by the belief that “the Eiffel Tower is there,” since otherwise the latter observation could not be said to be true under any circumstances. But if closure allows the agent to deduce their mental clarity from knowing that the tower is there, then this conflicts with the conclusion drawn from the sensitivity condition. It has been established that the belief about not being hallucinated is not qualifiable as knowledge, given the sensitivity condition.

This tension underscores a fundamental incompatibility between two types of beliefs that the sensitivity condition and closure make explicit [4]. There are many beliefs that are known to be true simply from common sense, or they are beliefs whose falsity would make true beliefs an empty concept, e.g., empirical observation about reality. On the other hand, there are beliefs that undermine the foundation of the truth of beliefs and consequently that of knowledge, e.g., the belief that the subject was hallucinated, the brain in a tank, or the existence of a Cartesian demon. The first type of belief presupposes the negation of the latter, whose negation is not plausibly knowable.

The ideal resolution of this dilemma is to redefine closure in such a way as to avoid these skeptical beliefs altogether [2]. For instance, one may improve upon the existing closure principle in such a

way as to permit the knowledge of agents of the falsity of skeptical propositions based on common sense or remove these skeptical propositions from the discussion altogether. But assuming that these projects fail, as argued by Nozick [3], then it is more advisable to give up the sensitivity condition altogether.

This decision is not so much motivated by the value of epistemic closure as by the problems associated with the sensitivity condition itself [2]. This is not to say epistemic closure is unattractive since it is quite plausible given the need for an explanation over inferential knowledge. But what is key here is that the sensitivity condition is too flawed as a sound analysis of the conditions of knowledge to warrant being preferred over the concept of closure, which has shown comparatively more plausibility.

To begin with, one would still struggle with combining the two types of beliefs, even if there was no epistemic closure. The thought that one would know everyday occurrences but not know that they are being deceived (this holds under sensitivity regardless of closure) seems inherently an unintuitive thing to believe in. Even if it be granted that this is acceptable, sensitivity still struggles with its primary aim of addressing all Gettier cases, which is the motivation for adopting the condition in the first place [4]. Consider the Eiffel Tower example once more, if it be granted that the real Eiffel Tower is always observably made of steel and the poster has an Eiffel Tower that looks observably like a paper tower. Then it follows that the proposition “there is a steel Eiffel Tower” will be sensitive, given that if there were only a paper Eiffel Tower, the agent would not believe that proposition. However, for the same scenario where the agent’s view is blocked by a paper poster, “there is an Eiffel Tower” is still ruled out by the sensitivity condition. This case then presupposes the agent has prior knowledge of the content of the Eiffel Tower being of significance, which is an implausible question. But if this presupposition is not fulfilled, then it seems unintuitive why one true belief qualifies knowledge when the other does not, despite the two being equivalent enough that their conditions for knowledge should be similar, especially given that there have already left the steel/paper significance out of the discussion.

4. Gettier revisited - a problem for all

As aforementioned, the Gettier problem presents a formidable challenge to the traditional JTB account of knowledge. It effectively demonstrating that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge. While what Nozick has attempted to revise the JTB account by adding further conditions of sensitivity, these efforts have faced persistent difficulties. It is possible to think of Gettier-style problems as part of the inherent vulnerability of JTB accounts, however they are edited or amended. There is a generalized recipe for constructing such counterexamples and this reveals a systematic flaw in this approach to analyzing knowledge [5].

The recipe begins with a justified false belief that satisfies the additional conditions proposed by a given theory of knowledge. In this case, it is sensitivity. This belief is stipulated as false but justified according to the criteria of the theory. The crucial step then involves modifying the scenario. The scenario is modified such that through a stroke of luck this belief is made true. This modification ensures that the belief now satisfies all the conditions of the sensitivity theory of knowledge. However, the element of luck introduced to make the belief true simultaneously undermines its status as knowledge. While technically a justified true belief according to the analysis he resulting belief by Nozickm it is intuitively not knowledge. This is because its truth is accidental rather than arising from a genuine cognitive connection to reality [5].

This recipe highlights a fundamental tension within the project of analyzing knowledge. The goal is to identify conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for knowledge. This excludes cases of mere lucky guesses or coincidences. However, any attempt to add conditions to knowledge to potentially exclude some Gettier-style cases inevitably creates new vulnerabilities. The very process

of adding conditions opens up new avenues for constructing counterexamples by finding a justified false belief that satisfies those conditions and then converting it into a justified true belief through luck. This creates a seemingly inescapable dilemma [5]. Defenders of the analytical project are left with two unpalatable options. The first option is to weaken the justification condition to the point where it no longer excludes lucky true beliefs. This effectively concedes that justification plays no significant role in distinguishing knowledge from mere true belief. It renders the entire project of analyzing knowledge in terms of justification rather pointless. If any justified true belief counts as knowledge, then the Gettier problem ceases to be a problem. This is at the cost of abandoning any meaningful distinction between knowledge and luck.

The second option is to strengthen the justification condition to the point where it entails truth. This would solve the Gettier problem because a belief that is justified in a strong sense that it could not possibly be false. However, this solution is equally problematic. It makes the truth condition redundant. Truth would already be guaranteed by justification. Moreover, it places an extremely high bar on justification and potentially excludes many ordinary forms of belief that people typically consider knowledge. These include perceptual beliefs or inductive inferences. If only beliefs that are guaranteed to be true can be justified, then much of what people take to be knowledge would no longer qualify. Either it is imperative to abandon the distinction between knowledge and lucky true belief, or it is necessary to impose an impossibly demanding standard for justification that excludes much of what people ordinarily consider knowledge [5]. Neither option is satisfactory. This suggests that the traditional project of analyzing knowledge in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions may be fundamentally flawed.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has outlined and discussed, respectively, the sensitivity condition for knowledge and the concept of epistemic closure. The essay has explored how the two create fundamentally incompatible beliefs and argued that sensitivity conditions should be forsaken in favor of epistemic closure because the latter concept exhibits more plausibility, aligns better with intuitions, and, most importantly, does not deliver on the promise of a complete resolution of Gettier cases.

References

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