

A Gricean Approach to the Gettier Problem

Allan Hazlett

allanhazlett@gmail.com

Draft.

David Lewis maintained that epistemological contextualism (on which the truth-conditions for utterances of “S knows p” change in different contexts depending on the salient “alternative possibilities”) could solve the problem of skepticism as well as the Gettier problem.¹ Contextualist approaches to skepticism have become commonplace, if not orthodox, in epistemology. But not so for contextualist approaches to the Gettier problem: the standard approach to this has been to add an “anti-luck” condition to the analysis of knowledge.²

I have argued that a Gricean theory of knowledge attributions is superior to contextualism.³ And I have argued that such a theory can go some way towards solving the problem of skepticism.⁴ And I have so far assumed that whatever contextualism could do, I could do better, within a Gricean framework. If Lewis is right about contextualism and the Gettier problem, and my assumption is true, then there should be a Gricean solution to the Gettier problem.

There is. Let’s begin by observing that we have a variety of distinct uses for knowledge attributions. Another way of putting this is that there are a plurality of distinct things that we sometimes do when we attribute knowledge. One of these things that we sometimes do is to say something about the quality or nature of someone’s evidence for some belief of hers. To see this, consider some cases.

1. Lenny and Ed are going to place bets on a horse race. Lenny says that he is going to make a phone call to get a tip from an informant as to which horse will win. Ed doesn’t know, but Lenny does, that the informant works in the stables and has recently injected all but one horse with lethargy-inducing drugs. Ed is suspicious and wants to know how Lenny can be so sure that the informant’s information can be trusted. Lenny, not wanting to reveal too much about the fixing of the race, says: “Don’t worry, my guy knows which horse will win.”

¹ In “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

² See Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck*, and John Greco, “Agent Reliabilism” and “Knowledge as Credit for True Belief.”

³ In “Knowledge and Conversation,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2009). Other defenders of this approach include Patrick Rysiew (in his 2001 *Nous* paper), Duncan Pritchard (in *Epistemic Luck* (2005), pp. 79-92, and ‘Contextualism, Scepticism and Warranted Assertibility Manoeuvres’, in J. Keim-Campbell, M. O’Rourke, and H. Silverstein (eds.), *Knowledge and Skepticism* (MIT Press, 2005)), Tim Black, and Jessica Brown.

⁴ *Ibid.*

By saying this, Lenny implies that his informant has some kind of *privileged evidential position* with respect to the outcome of the race. In the context of a conversation about the trustworthiness of a tip on a horse race, felicitously saying that an informant “knows” the outcome requires that the informant have some kind of “inside information” about factors relevant to the outcome of the race. If Lenny did not know that his informant was involved in fixing the race – if, for example, the informant were just another gambler, making predictions about the race in the usual way, based on intuition or horses’ records or track conditions – then his utterance would be misleading. This would be so, even if the informant’s beliefs about the outcome of the race were true, and, I submit, even if his beliefs about the outcome of the race amounted to knowledge (perhaps he is a very reliable predictor of horse races). To see this, consider another case (from Jennifer Lackey):

2. Maggie is a brain cancer specialist; Sid her is patient. Maggie is about to examine some MRI results to determine if Sid has a cancerous brain tumor. But she gets the urge to go to the movies, and asks a reliable colleague to check the results for her, while she plays hooky. When she returns, her colleague informs her that the MRI indicates brain cancer. She takes the file containing the MRI results and meets with Sid. She tells him that he has brain cancer. Sid asks if she knows this for certain, as his brain feels fine. She replies that she does.⁵

As Lackey argues, Maggie’s attribution of knowledge to herself is inappropriate. I say the reason is that it is misleading: it implies that Maggie has checked the test results personally, and not merely received reliable testimony about them from a colleague. In the context of a conversation about the results of an MRI between a brain cancer specialist and her patient, felicitously saying that she knows that the patient has cancer requires that the physician have personally come to that conclusion on the basis of the test results. And this is so even if the patient really has cancer, and (here is the point) even if Maggie really does know that the patient has cancer, which she plausibly does in this case. Lenny’s informant may know the outcome of the race, but unless his knowledge is based on “inside information,” Lenny should not say that he knows, and Maggie may know that Sid has brain cancer, but unless that knowledge is based on her own medical expertise, she should not say that she knows. In these contexts, the attribution of knowledge implies a privileged evidential position.

We should say more about this notion of a “privileged evidential position.” In the case of Lenny’s informant, what seems required is that the informant possess evidence relevant to the outcome of the race that Lenny and Ed don’t possess, or, better, evidence that isn’t available to the ordinary gambler. The context of Lenny and Ed’s conversation assumes a background of “common knowledge” about the race – all the information contained in published program, perhaps the information reported in the horse racing newspapers, the weather and anything obvious to anyone paying attention at the track, and so on. To say that the informant has a “privileged evidential position,” relative to Lenny and Ed, is to say that he has some evidence relevant to the outcome of the race that goes beyond that stock of common knowledge assumed in Lenny and Ed’s

⁵ See Lackey’s paper on “second-hand knowledge.”

conversation. (I say “assumed,” but I do not mean that Lenny and Ed must literally have any beliefs about what is common knowledge between them.)

The case of Maggie is similar, though different in an illuminating way. Maggie does have evidence that Sid lacks, relevant to his cancer, namely, the testimony of a reliable brain cancer specialist. But what is worth noting about this evidence that she has, that goes beyond Sid’s evidence, is that *Sid could easily access this evidence*. Were Sid to ask Maggie’s colleague, he could come to have all the evidence that Maggie has, relevant to his cancer. Although Maggie’s evidence is not actually possessed by Sid, it is (in some sense) available to him.

Let us say that S is in a privileged evidential position with respect of R just in case S actually possesses some evidence that is neither actually possessed by R *nor* accessible to R. And let us assume that whatever is “common knowledge” between conversational participants is accessible to each of them. The notion of a piece of evidence being “accessible” is still vague and unarticulated. But we can now state our hypothesis: in some contexts, an utterance of “S knows p” implies that S is in a privileged evidential position with respect of some salient class of people.

What might explain this hypothesis, if it is true? This is where we should appeal to Grice’s theory of conversational implicature. Suppose a pre-Gettier conception of knowledge as justified true belief. Assume – and this will be rough, for now – that justification has something to do with evidential position. But assume that an utterance of “S knows p” does not require, for its truth, that S be in a privileged evidential position with respect of anyone. (This seems required for any common sense anti-skeptical position, for there are things that I seem to know (or to be required to know, by closure, if I am to know things that I surely seem to know), such as that there are external things, where I seem to enjoy no privileged evidential position.) Why, in cases (1) and (2), does an utterance of “S knows p” imply a privileged position for S, when such an utterance does not entail a privileged position for S?

The answer lies in Grice’s maxim of Relation, which enjoins speakers to make their contributions to a conversation relevant, and in two specific features of cases (1) and (2), which (I submit) will be present in all cases in which a privileged evidential position is implied by a knowledge attribution. To see this, we must put ourselves in Ed’s shoes, and imagine trying to work out the relevance of Lenny’s utterance, to the effect that the informant knows which horse is going to win. It is clearly not in question whether the informant believes that some particular horse is going to win. So Lenny did not say what he said for the sake of telling Ed about the informant’s beliefs. (Compare the case of the suspicious cuckold, who knows about the affair; when the adulteress attributes knowledge to him, her point is that he believes that she is having an affair, which explains why it would be absurd for her lover to reply that the cuckold’s belief is unjustified.) Neither, I maintain, did Lenny say what he said *simply* for the sake of telling Ed that the informant’s belief is *true*. For (i) he has already indicated, by the fact that he is going to take the informant’s tip, that he thinks the informant’s belief is true, and (ii) the truth of the informant’s belief is just what has been called into question by Ed’s previous utterance. Lenny and Ed are in a conversation where (a) it is mutually agreed that the informant believes something, and (b) the truth of what the informant believes has been called into

question. It is in this context that Lenny chooses to say that the informant knows. This utterance could be relevant, therefore, only if Lenny is trying to indicate something about the informant's *justification* for his belief – given our assumption that knowledge is justified true belief. Lenny is, in effect, focusing Ed's attention on the fact that the informant's belief is justified. But what could his purpose be in doing this? In other words, what would his purpose have to be, to make his remark relevant? I think the only answer Ed can give to this question, while retaining the assumption that Lenny is cooperating with him and abiding by the maxim of Relation, is that Ed knows that the informant has "inside information" about the race. And *that* is why Lenny's utterance implies (as I think it clearly does) that the informant has "inside information" – because the only purpose Lenny could have had, in saying what he said, was to suggest to Ed that the informant had inside information; the only way his utterance could have been relevant to the conversation would be if the informant did have "inside information." Otherwise, it would have been an utterly pointless thing to say. Given this, and the Gricean assumption of cooperation, the utterance therefore implied that the informant did have "inside information."

Something similar can be said about Maggie's implication that her conclusions were based on her own analysis of the test results.

Now I maintain that this phenomenon – the implication of a privileged evidential position, via the maxim of Relevance – is what is going on in Gettier cases. And what I mean by saying that it is "what is going on" is that this phenomenon explains why we are reluctant to attribute knowledge to subjects in Gettier cases, and it explains why we are even tempted to deny that subjects in Gettier cases know.

This is most plausible – although ultimately I think we should accept this for all Gettier cases – in Alvin Goldman's famous "fake barn" case. We are given the following scenario and question:

3. José is driving through an unusual rural area where about 95% of the structures in the fields are not barns but rather barn facades, which look from a distance just like barns to the ordinary observer. (Of course they look different up close, or through binoculars, or whatever.) The remaining structures are real barns. José and his daughter, ignorant of the existence of the barn facades, have decided to make a game of spotting barns (they are, evidently, bored out of their minds), so whenever either of them see a red, barn-shaped structure in the distance, they point it out and say, "There's a barn." Now at some point they drive by one of the rare real barns, which look the same as the fakes, and José sees it and believes it's a barn and says, "There's a barn." His belief is true, and justified. But does he know that the structure he sees is a barn?

We're inclined to say no. But notice that all the elements present in cases (1) and (2) are present here, in one form or another. That (a) José believes has been stipulated; that (b) his belief is true has been stipulated. When we are asked about whether he knows, therefore, we rightly ignore the question of whether he believes or of whether his belief is true. (We can imagine contexts of conversation, about the same "fake barn" scenario, in which such questions might be salient – if

there is a barn in the middle of the road, and José's car will hit it unless he is planning to swerve, we might ask whether José knows that there is a barn before him, and here we would be happy to say that he does, so long as he truly believes that there is a barn there.) So the question becomes one of justification.

But, of course, his belief is intuitively justified as well. But recall the idea from above: to attribute knowledge we must have some purpose; our utterances must be relevant to the conversation. Given that we are in a conversation where the truth of the subject's belief is mutually recognized, to attribute knowledge will be to draw attention to José's justification, to focus our interlocutor's attention on it. What would this imply? What I want to suggest is that this would imply the same thing that it implies in cases (1) and (2): that the subject who is said to know has a privileged evidential position with respect of some salient class of people. In José's case, to attribute knowledge would imply that José has some way of telling that this is a fake barn, rather than one of the many facades whose existence the story has drawn our attention to. Anyone driving through "fake barn" country can see that the structure José is looking at is red and barn-shaped. To say that he knows, then, in this context, implies that he has some evidence beyond that "common knowledge" that anyone might have. It implies that he has sharper vision than most, and so can tell real barns from barn facades at a distance, or it implies that he has "insider information" as to which barns are real (perhaps they have a certain unique shape), or that he has looked through binoculars, or has inspected this barn up close on a previous visit, or whatever. But since José (by hypothesis) does not have a privileged evidential position with respect of any salient group – he doesn't even know he's in "fake barn country" – it would be misleading to say that he knows, because this would imply that he does enjoy some privileged position.

But he knows! We just ought not say that he does. Just as Lenny's informant may know, and Maggie plausibly knows, José knows – he has a justified true belief, after all – but it would be pragmatically inappropriate to say that he does.

Something similar can be said about other Gettier cases: Russell's case of the stopped clock, Harman's case of the unopened letter, and Gettier's own cases of inference via a false lemma. Gettier cases are stories that highlight the poor epistemic position of a particular subject.

Objection: "p" improper \neq intuition that p false.

Objection: all conversational implicatures are cancellable.