Not Esoteric, Just Fallible:

Comment on Starmans and Friedman about Philosophical Expertise

ABSTRACT

Gettier cases are scenarios conceived by philosophers to demonstrate that justified true beliefs may not be knowledge. Starmans and Friedman (2020) find that philosophers attribute knowledge in Gettier cases differently from laypeople and non-philosophy academics, which seems to suggest that philosophers may be indoctrinated to adopt an esoteric concept of knowledge. I argue to the contrary: their finding at most shows that philosophical reflection is fallible, but nevertheless able to clarify the concept of knowledge. I also suggest that their experiments could be modified to help determine when philosophical reflection might yield plausible results.

The so-called "Gettier cases" are constructed by philosophers to demonstrate that beliefs acquired in those cases are justified and true, but considered not knowledge. Empirical studies, however, show that laypeople often attribute knowledge in Gettier cases. In response, some philosophers (Williamson, 2011) argue that laypeople lack the philosophical expertise necessary for conducting thought experiments properly to analyze concepts. To examine the expertise defense, Starmans and Friedman (2020) investigate responses from non-philosophy academics and find that their intuitions about knowledge attribution align more closely with laypeople. This casts doubt on the expertise defense because other academics are likewise "highly educated" and dedicated to "the pursuit of knowledge" (p.5), so it's unreasonable for philosophers to assume that other academics have a simplistic or confused conception of knowledge. Accordingly, one may wonder that philosophers are indoctrinated into "a sort of echo chambers" and adopt an esoteric concept of knowledge (p.26).

Philosophical Expertise. On the contrary, what Starmans and Friedman show is that philosophers do have expertise in conceptual analysis. Let us begin with something fairly uncontroversial: the factivity of knowledge. Starmans and Friedman find that no philosophers attribute knowledge to people who believe falsely, but 52% of laypeople and 29% of non-philosophy academics think that such people have knowledge. Although 29% looks like a minority, it must be compared with the rate of knowledge attribution in normal justified true belief conditions, i.e., 39% (as Starmans and Friedman emphasize, the patterns are revealed in the relative differences among knowledge attributions in different conditions). Other academics' intuitions about whether knowledge is factive, therefore, align more closely with laypeople than philosophers. Should we conclude that the philosophical concept of knowledge is esoteric?

Not really. Starmans and Friedman seem to agree with philosophers that knowledge is factive. Citing other research (Buckwalter, 2014), they suggest that those who initially regard knowledge as non-factive "do not mean this literally and are happier to select the response that the protagonist 'only thinks she knows'" (p.23). So, people—even academics—often have a confused understanding of some concepts or do not use them carefully. With the aid of philosophical reflection, they can uncover the errors and reach a more nuanced understanding of the concepts. The fact that philosophers unequivocally affirm the factivity of knowledge demonstrates that philosophical expertise exists.

Furthermore, Starmans and Friedman's research shows that the philosophical discovery of the factivity condition is no small achievement because a significant number of people—including academics—fail to grasp the factivity of knowledge.

Gettier Case. Now, if many non-philosophers cannot even grasp the factivity of knowledge, how can we trust their intuitions about Gettier cases, which are philosophers' creations unfamiliar to non-philosophers?

The problem is exacerbated because Starmans and Friedman find that non-philosophers are "marginally more likely to attribute knowledge in the Gettier condition than in the [false belief] condition" (p.9). Since they can overturn their initial judgments and later deny knowledge in the false belief cases, wouldn't they similarly learn to deny knowledge in Gettier cases? Some research (Turri, 2013) shows that people can be instructed to do so. This time, however, Starmans and Friedman are not warming to using philosophical reflection to change people's intuitions about Gettier cases because they worry about indoctrination (p.22). But they don't worry indoctrination over the factivity condition. The critical issue is, therefore,

which side gets things right. Since non-philosophers fails to grasp the factivity condition, there is no reason to think that they are more correct than philosophers over Gettier cases.

That said, I want to make a conciliatory note. Starmans and Friedman indicate that non-philosophers attribute knowledge in authentic evidence Gettier cases (where the protagonist's belief is based on non-faulty evidence), but deny knowledge in apparent evidence Gettier cases (p.21). In this case, laypeople, not philosophers, appear to be correct. A growing number of philosophers now accept that people acquire knowledge in authentic evidence Gettier cases (Hetherington, 1999; Sosa, 2011; Turri, 2017). Having expertise doesn't make philosophers immune from mistakes. Empirical research on laypeople's intuitions can and does help philosophers spot their errors.

Nevertheless, even granted that philosophers are wrong about the authentic evidence Gettier cases, it doesn't follow that philosophical expertise doesn't exist; after all, philosophers are still right about the apparent cases (as well as factivity and justification). Therefore, the lesson to learn from Starmans and Friedman should be this: philosophical reflection is useful but fallible—though the same can be said of most research methods.

Indoctrination. To say that philosophical reflection is likewise fallible is an understatement of its weakness. Unlike other methods, there is no specific agreed procedure to determine when philosophical reflection gets the correct results. Philosophical reflection is done through arguments. But what counts as a good arguments is largely a matter of philosophical consensus. If philosophers can only rely on their consensus, this naturally brings us back to the worry of indoctrination.

To address the indoctrination worry, we could modify the experiment of Starmans and Friedman, that is, we could recruit non-philosophy academics to receive philosophical training and see whether they would agree with philosophers. If they do, we may conclude that philosophers get plausible results; otherwise, philosophers may need to examine what went wrong. Since other academics are highly educated and critically-minded (Starmans and Friedman show that they are even more skeptical than philosophers), they are unlikely to be indoctrinated (if they are, doesn't it show that they are not critically-minded enough?). Therefore, though Starmans and Friedman do not show that philosophers' expertise defense is unwarranted, they do indicate a plausible approach to test it.

The proposed study might involve asking participants – academics or PhD students – to rate on a series of Likert scales whether the protagonists in a series of Gettier and superficially similar non-Gettier cases "know". Each of the cases could be accompanied by an argument for or against knowledge (with the arguments written in conjunction with expert philosophers). Alternatively, the participants might be asked to rate the validity of the arguments for and against true knowledge in the Gettier cases. The results of those with and without philosophy training might also be compared to assess the effect of that training.

A simpler design (mentioned also by Starmans and Friedman) is to employ the question structure similar to Turri (2013), in order to help participants to notice the elements philosophers consider crucial. Turri finds that, when the questions are properly structured, laypeople usually deny knowledge in Gettier cases. If other academics can be prompted to produce similar responses, we may conclude that

philosophers are largely right about Gettier cases.[1]

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