

CONCERNING SARTWELL'S MINIMALIST THESIS

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THE TRADITIONAL DEFINITION of knowledge consists of three basic conditions: In order for *s* to know that *p*, (i) *s* must be confident that *p*, (ii) *s* must have a strong reason for believing that *p*, and (iii) *p* must be true. In other words, knowledge is equivalent to justified, true belief. However, Edmund Gettier's counterexamples (Gettier 121-123) have prompted many philosophers to look for a fourth condition to complete the analysis of knowledge. Thus, these philosophers maintain that knowledge is *at least* justified true belief.

Crispin Sartwell has taken a unique approach to resolving this controversy. Rather than attempting to define a fourth condition for propositional knowledge, Sartwell has proposed that knowledge is equivalent to mere true belief. He has presented two papers ("Knowledge is Merely True Belief", 157-165; "Why Knowledge is Merely True Belief", 167-180) supporting this view, which has been labeled the *minimalist* account of the concept of knowledge. A summary and critical evaluation of these papers follows. My primary goal is to show that the minimalist account is false.

Summary of Sartwell's Thesis

Sartwell attempts to do three things in his initial paper. First, he tries to refute the obvious counterexamples to the true belief thesis. Second, he argues that the minimalist view is superior to the traditional view that knowledge is justified true belief. Finally, he establishes a framework for his later paper by analyzing the relationship between justification and truth.

A good portion of Sartwell's first paper is an attempt to show why various counterexamples fall short of disproving the minimalist thesis. Sartwell offers four seemingly obvious counterexamples: (1) believing that the Pythagorean theorem is true based solely on a dream; (2) picking the winner of a horse race by guessing; (3) reflexively stating that Goldbach's conjecture is true after undergoing brain surgery by a mad scientist; and (4) making astrological predictions that turn out to be true. Each of these is a case of true belief that seems to fall short of genuine knowledge because of the random or unreliable way in which the belief is generated. That is, in each case, the belief appears to be unjustified.

In defense of his position, Sartwell contends that none of the above

situations is actually a case of belief. According to Sartwell, a genuine belief must fulfill two criteria. First, it must be a claim to which the subject has a sufficient degree of commitment. This entails that the subject continue to support the claim even if it is brought into question. Sartwell argues that case (2) is a situation in which the subject shows a lack of commitment. However, an analogous example may provide the reader with better insight.

Consider an investor who has devised a method for picking stocks in which he closes his eyes and throws darts at the stock symbols in the newspaper. On one particular day, the dart lands on IBM. The man proceeds to invest ten percent of his portfolio in the company. He then brags to his friends that he believes the stock will rise twenty points within the next month. However, after only one week, the stock actually *declines* twenty points. Heeding the advice of his broker, the investor sells all of his shares of IBM. Then, over the next three weeks, shares of the company rise 50 points. From this, it is clear that the investor was not committed to the claim that shares of IBM would rise 20 points within the month. As soon as the claim became questionable, he withdrew it. In such cases, as Sartwell puts it, the subject may act as though the proposition is true without actually believing it.

Sartwell's second criterion for a genuine belief is that it must be consistent with a larger system of beliefs. In other words, no belief can stand in isolation. Sartwell uses case (3) as an example. Simply uttering the phrase "Goldbach's conjecture is true" does not constitute a genuine belief. Such a claim presupposes that one already has certain beliefs about such things as mathematics and the English language. Furthermore, making such a claim entails that one can actually describe what the conjecture means.

To summarize, opponents of the true belief thesis typically cite counterexamples that are similar or identical to cases (1) to (4) above. Sartwell argues that such cases cannot be used as counterexamples because they fail to count as cases of belief. Specifically, case (2) is not a case of belief because the subject is not sufficiently committed to the claim that the horse he picked at random will win the race. In case (3), the subject's claim is too isolated from his integrated belief system to be considered a belief. Though Sartwell never discusses cases (1) and (4) in detail, it is not difficult to see how both fail to meet Sartwell's criteria for a genuine belief.

Sartwell goes on to provide counterexamples to the justified true belief (JTB) thesis. Three specific counterexamples are given: (a) the case of mathematical insight, in which the mathematician is able to discern the solution to a problem before providing an adequate proof, (b) religious faith or faith in another person, and (c) situations in which

it is appropriate to conclude, "I knew it all along." According to Sartwell, *if* these are cases of propositional knowledge, then not all knowledge is justified true belief. However, it becomes clear that the main goal of the counterexamples is not to disprove the JTB thesis (as this has already been done), but rather to show why the justification clause is not necessary for knowledge. Indeed, the remainder of Sartwell's paper is spent defending this very point.

Sartwell contends that justification is a *criterion*, rather than a logically necessary condition, of knowledge. In this sense, a criterion is a rule or test on which a decision or judgment can be based. The distinction between such a test and the inherent qualities of an item may not be immediately obvious. Sartwell provides the following example:

...it is a criterion for something to be gold that it yields a certain characteristic taste when bitten. In cases where we are in doubt about whether something is gold or not, we may well employ this criterion in deciding the matter. But it is hardly a logically necessary condition of something's being gold that it yields this taste when bitten. ("Knowledge is Merely", 161)

Sartwell continues his argument by examining the activity of justification itself. He identifies two situations in which we might demand a justification from someone claiming to know a given proposition. More commonly, we ask for justification in controversial situations, in which we are uncertain of or even doubt the veracity of the proposition. In such cases, it is not difficult to see how justification might be construed as having instrumental (rather than intrinsic) value. Much like the test we actuate to determine if something is gold, justification serves as a test to ascertain or confirm whether the proposition is true.

Less frequently, we may demand justification in noncontroversial situations—that is, when the rationality of the claimant is questionable. In such instances, though we may already believe the proposition is true, we may still have misgivings about the person making the claim. For example, we would not normally question someone who claimed to know the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$, as this is genuinely regarded as "common knowledge". However, if the person is a patient in a psychiatric hospital, and is prone to nonsensical outbursts, we may very well ask her to justify this belief. If she then states that she was told the proposition by one of the voices in her head, we would be inclined to admit that she does not know it after all.

What is relevant in the above example is whether it is possible for the patient to truly believe (according to Sartwell's criteria) the

mathematical equality. In fact, there is no need to debate this point because Sartwell has already conceded that it *is* possible. Thus, if the above conclusion is correct (i.e. if the patient does not know the proposition), then Sartwell's argument collapses. However, Sartwell contends that the patient does in fact have knowledge of the proposition. He states that what we are doing in such a case is disaffirming the doxastic procedures of the claimant, not doubting the claim itself. This, in turn, will affect our assessment of her future knowledge claims; however, it does nothing to refute her current assertion.

In contrast to his first paper on the topic, Sartwell's second paper actually provides an argument for his thesis. He begins by proposing a working definition of the concept of knowledge. He contends that the human mind uses inquiry to establish beliefs about particular propositions, and that knowledge is the ultimate goal of such a process. In other words, knowledge is the *telos* of inquiry. This is the fundamental concept in all of Sartwell's subsequent arguments.

Sartwell continues by relating his theory of justification to the process of inquiry. He argues that the only coherent view of justification is one based on teleological concepts. According to this view, justification serves (a) to examine the correct procedures for inquiry and (b) to evaluate those procedures on the basis of some standard. Justification is contingent upon being in a strong position to generate a true belief; however, one is not always responsible for attaining such a position.

The above theory of justification is central to Sartwell's discussion of truth conduciveness. He points out that many philosophers maintain that our epistemic goal is achieving true beliefs, and that justification is a mechanism by which we arrive at and evaluate such beliefs. Furthermore, he argues that philosophers holding this view have necessarily committed themselves to the conclusion that knowledge is merely true belief. The formal argument is as follows:

Sartwell's Main Argument that Knowledge is Merely True Belief

1. True belief is the goal of inquiry.
2. Justification is a means to achieve this goal, and not part of the goal itself.
3. Knowledge is another term for the goal of inquiry.
4. Therefore, knowledge is merely true belief.

Critical Evaluation

Sartwell should be commended for his audacity; the fact that he has constructed and defended a challenging argument for the

minimalist thesis is truly remarkable. Nonetheless, his articles have elicited only a small response from the philosophical community. A likely explanation for this is that epistemologists are convinced that Sartwell's thesis is subject to the same Gettier-type counterexamples that have disproved the JTB thesis. Therefore, this issue warrants further attention.

Malcolm is one of many who have argued that knowledge is equivalent to justified true belief.¹ Gettier refuted these arguments by presenting cases of justified true belief that are not cases of knowledge. Arthur Skidmore, the main proponent of Sartwell's point of view, believes one of the major advantages of the minimalist philosophy is that it avoids the Gettier paradoxes (Skidmore "Is Knowledge Merely", 71-76) An examination of one of these cases substantiates Skidmore's claim.

Gettier's first case tells the story of Smith and Jones, who have both applied for the same job. Smith has strong evidence to believe both that Jones will get the job and that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. From this, Smith validly infers that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. As it turns out, Smith is actually the one who gets the job. Furthermore, simply by happenstance, Smith also has ten coins in his pocket.

The first case centers on the following proposition (call it p): the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket. Smith is both confident that p and has strong reason to believe that p. In addition, p turns out to be true. However, this can hardly be considered a case of knowledge; Smith was not aware that he would get the job, and he did not know how many coins he had in his own pocket. The fact that p turned out to be true was simply by chance or luck. Thus, Gettier has established a case of justified true belief that is not a case of knowledge.

The problem with the tripartite view arises from the justification clause. In the above case, the established true belief is justified, but for the wrong reasons. Thus, it is not a case of knowledge. This problem can be avoided if one contends that knowledge is merely true belief. One holding this view would have to admit that the process of inquiry used to establish p may be prone to error. However, as explained above, this has nothing to do with the idea that knowledge is merely true belief. Knowledge is the same irrespective of the procedures by which it is reached.

The situation is similar to that of the mathematically inclined psychiatric patient described in Sartwell's first paper. The patient is convinced that the voices in her head represent reliable sources of knowledge. As a result, we might conclude that the doxastic

procedures she employs are misguided, and that her *future* knowledge claims should be regarded as highly suspect. However, this does nothing to alter her initial claim to knowledge. Likewise, Smith's methods of acquiring knowledge should be mistrusted, because they are also unreliable. These methods, in fact, led him to the false belief that Jones would get the job. However, they also yielded a true belief—namely, that the man who would get the job had ten coins in his pocket. Whether or not this occurred fortuitously is irrelevant according to Sartwell's viewpoint.

Now one might contend that intuition tells us that Smith's true belief does not constitute knowledge. However, one would also have to grant that appeals to intuition are not infallible. Indeed, such appeals led to the widespread adoption of the JTB thesis. Oddly, this same type of cognitive process also led to its downfall. That being said, it should be noted that Sartwell has created an extensive argument for his thesis. Any attempt to disprove it should focus on its underlying principles.

These principles, or premises, make Sartwell's main argument controversial. I would not argue with the first premise, which contends that true belief is the goal of inquiry. However, the second and third premises are highly controversial. The second premise states that justification is a criterion of knowledge; the third premise declares that knowledge is the goal of inquiry. Together, these premises allow Sartwell to conclude that knowledge is merely true belief. By themselves, they show nothing of the sort. Therefore, it is extremely important to assess their plausibility, beginning with the former.

Sartwell defines a criterion as "a test of whether an item has some property." He uses the gold example to clarify this point, stating that one criterion of gold is the taste it yields when bitten. He distinguishes this from the inherent qualities of the gold, which include its characteristic atomic number. He then explain that, just as the characteristic taste of gold is a criterion of the gold itself, so is justification a criterion of knowledge. However, this analogy is misguided.

Gold has a distinct taste, different from that of all other physical objects. This criterion does not arise spontaneously, nor is it produced by our senses. Rather, it is the inherent properties of the gold that give rise to its unique taste. Similarly, the inherent properties of gold give it a specific texture and appearance unlike those of any other object. In short, the criteria one uses to determine if something is gold are produced by the inherent qualities of the gold, *and not vice versa*.

If justification is a criterion of knowledge, then it follows that justification is produced by the inherent properties of knowledge, and not vice versa. According to Sartwell, the inherent qualities of

knowledge are truth and belief. However, neither truth nor belief gives rise to justification; in fact, it is just the opposite. Justification is truth-conducive; truth is not justification-conducive. Likewise, beliefs are generated after obtaining an appropriate justification, not the other way around.

This hardly proves that justification is a necessary component of knowledge. However, it does create the following dilemma for Sartwell and his supporters: either justification is integral to knowledge or it is not. If it is, then knowledge is not mere true belief. If it is not, then knowledge must contain some additional, unstated property besides truth and belief. Thus, knowledge is not equivalent to mere true belief.

Unlike the first premise discussed, Sartwell's contention that knowledge is the goal of inquiry is, for the most part, unsupported. It is merely an assumption that begs the question in favor of the conclusion. There is also something to be said about the way Sartwell uses this premise in his argument. Specifically, in order to conclude that knowledge is merely true belief, he must first show that the process of inquiry has only one goal. At present, it is perfectly logical to maintain that knowledge and mere true belief are separate goals, or that one goal is subsidiary to the other.

The situation is parallel to that of a track and field star training for the Olympic games. The athlete's main goal, of course, is to win a gold medal. However, in order to achieve this, she must first qualify to compete in the games at the Olympic trials. Thus, this becomes a subsidiary goal. Even though the athlete *must* compete in the trials in order to have a chance at winning a gold medal, the two goals cannot be equated. Similarly, one could contend that the overarching goal of inquiry is the attainment of knowledge, and that procuring true belief is merely a subsidiary goal. Even though one must obtain true belief before gaining knowledge, this in no way makes knowledge equivalent to mere true belief.

Sartwell avoids this complication by simply assuming that the attainment of knowledge and mere true belief are identical goals. Returning to the track star, Sartwell would deny that the attainment of true belief is like the athlete's goal to qualify for the Olympic games. Instead, he might say that attaining a true belief is like another goal, say finishing first at the Olympic games. Since finishing first is just another term for winning a gold medal, these two goals are identical. This type of reasoning enables Sartwell to conclude that knowledge is equivalent to mere true belief. So here is the first of Sartwell's assumptions.

This is not the only point in Sartwell's argument that can be

described as unsubstantiated, or, at the very least, equivocal. Sartwell argues that a genuine belief requires both a reasonable degree of commitment by the subject and a moderate consistency with the subject's existing state of beliefs and cognition. This seems to make the distinction between a justified belief and a mere belief lose its point; it leads to the view that anything that counts as a belief is *ipso facto* justified. Of course, this is an obvious objection, and it is even addressed to some extent by Sartwell in his first paper. However, he does not provide an account that resolves the issue.

For the sake of argument, it is useful to assume that Sartwell's claims about belief are correct. This would mean that his analysis of the counterexamples discussed in his first paper is also correct. Thus, in order to be considered valid counterexamples to the minimalist thesis, they would have to be revised so they satisfy Sartwell's two criteria for a genuine belief. Once the counterexamples have been revised, our intuitions regarding them will either change or remain the same. If our intuitions change, and we begin to regard them as cases of knowledge, then Sartwell's thesis will be supported. However, if our intuitions do not change, and we still regard them as cases that fall short of genuine knowledge, then Sartwell's analysis will have failed. The following counterexample, which fulfills both of Sartwell's criteria for a genuine belief, can be used to resolve this issue.

Consider a professional basketball player who has pronounced confidence in his ability to shoot free throws. Every time he goes to the foul line, he believes he is going to make the shot(s). He even visualizes the ball going into the basket before shooting, a technique that is not uncommon among ball players. During one particular season, the athlete takes 500 shots from the line, and makes 425. According to Sartwell's viewpoint, this means that the athlete *knew* he was going to make the shot on 425 occasions. The other 75 occasions, he did not know he was going to make the shot; he merely believed it.

I should pause here to distinguish this example from those already discussed by Sartwell. The subject's belief is not founded in a dream, guess, or divination. It is most comparable to the gambler's belief that the horse he picked at random will win the race. The key difference is that the athlete has a good deal of confidence in his claim. In other words, he is committed to it. This example is also distinct from that of the mathematically inclined psychiatric patient. The doxastic procedures of the psychiatric patient are highly questionable because they are likely, in many cases, to yield false beliefs. Thus, her future knowledge claims should be subjected to close scrutiny. In contrast, there is no reason to doubt the doxastic procedures of the athlete; in most cases, these methods yield a true belief.

Sartwell's account forces us to admit that the athlete has some sort of prescience about making individual foul shots. Of course, this notion is absurd. No matter how adept someone is at shooting free throws, he or she cannot possibly know beforehand that their next shot will go into the basket. Either this represents some type of peculiar paradox, or the athlete's true belief does not constitute knowledge. I would argue the latter.

There is one final point concerning Sartwell's first paper that is worthy of discussion. A large portion of this paper is spent discussing why the minimalist thesis is superior to the JTB thesis. Sartwell even provides several counterexamples to the JTB thesis to support his claim. In another paper defending Sartwell's viewpoint, Art Skidmore attempts to introduce an additional counterexample to the JTB thesis—that of so-called tacit knowledge. According to Skidmore, if his counterexample succeeds, then Sartwell's case against the JTB proponents will be clinched (Skidmore "On Sartwell's", 123-127).

Tacit knowledge is a type of propositional knowledge that is acquired by all who venture to learn the English language. However, no one is able to provide a justification for how he or she obtains such knowledge. Skidmore uses the following proposition as an example: 'Snow is white' is true if snow is white. He argues that it would be difficult or impossible for someone to articulate a plausible justification for this claim. This is because any justification would have to appeal to the very linguistic matters that are necessary to understand the proposition in the first place.

Skidmore uses the example of tacit knowledge to put forth an argument that, if correct, would show the JTB thesis to be self-refuting and hence false. His argument is as follows: tacit knowledge is defined as a type of knowledge that does not require justification. Our belief that knowledge is justified true belief is itself tacit. Therefore, our supposed knowledge that knowledge is justified true belief does not itself require justification. Thus, knowledge is not equivalent to justified true belief.

Skidmore overlooks one critical feature of his argument. Specifically, if his argument were correct, it would not only disprove the JTB account, but would also refute Sartwell's minimalist thesis. Since Skidmore's argument describes a type of knowledge that is void of justification, it appears to substantiate Sartwell's account. However, this is definitely not the case. Skidmore has misinterpreted the minimalist thesis.

Sartwell's account does not relieve us of the epistemic burden of producing a justification. He asserts this point repeatedly in his first paper. In one section, he describes justification as a means by which

we reach the goal of true belief and by which we confirm that this goal has been reached. It is certainly possible to arrive at a true belief without any credible justification, as the case of the psychiatric patient illustrates. However, this occurs simply by happenstance. In order for a large number of people to arrive at this same knowledge claim, some kind of justification would have to be provided. As Sartwell puts it, “if someone claims to know a proposition that I do not believe to be true, or about which I have no opinion, it may be perfectly legitimate for me to deny the knowledge-claim when the claimant cannot produce good reasons” (Sartwell “Knowledge is Merely”, 161).

Skidmore has presented a useful analogy to Sartwell’s position in which he describes justification as a type of road map that we use to arrive at our final destination of knowledge (“Is Knowledge Merely”, 72). However, if Skidmore’s argument about tacit knowledge were correct, then it would completely eliminate this map; yet somehow, everyone would still arrive at the same cognitive destination. You certainly cannot have it both ways. Either his hypothesis about tacit knowledge is correct and both the JTB and the minimalist thesis should be rejected, or his hypothesis is incorrect and has no impact on either thesis.

Conclusion

Crispin Sartwell has presented a challenging argument for his minimalist thesis, rather than simply appealing to intuition. His view has the advantage of being simpler than all other contemporary accounts of knowledge. Furthermore, it is not subject to the Gettier-type counterexamples that have disproved the JTB thesis. Still, there are many points in Sartwell’s argument that can be described as either misguided or unsubstantiated.

Sartwell does not adequately defend his thesis from some seemingly obvious objections. His main contention is that many alleged counterexamples to the true belief thesis are based on an inadequate notion of belief. However, even if we revise these counterexamples so that they represent cases of genuine belief (according to Sartwell’s two necessary conditions), our intuitions about them do not change. That is, we still regard them as counterexamples.

Furthermore, Sartwell’s main conceptual argument is based on two controversial premises. One premise describes justification as a criterion, rather than a logically necessary condition, of knowledge. In support of this premise, Sartwell uses a misleading analogy that is incompatible with his conclusion. The other premise is unsupported; it simply makes the assumption that knowledge is the goal of rational inquiry. Even if we grant this, Sartwell still must show that the process

of inquiry has only one goal in order to support his conclusion.

Finally, it should be noted that the philosophical community has provided very little (if any) support for Sartwell's thesis. Skidmore's two articles merely summarize Sartwell's standpoint. Skidmore's only original argument, concerning tacit knowledge, actually contradicts Sartwell's point of view. The only other article written in response to the minimalist thesis is that of William Lycan (Lycan 1-3). The self-proclaimed "exotic, roundabout objection" offered by Lycan has yet to be addressed by Sartwell. Given a combination of all of these factors, one must conclude that knowledge is not equivalent to mere true belief.

NOTES

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¹ See his "Knowledge and Belief".

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