JUSTIFICATION IN KNOWLEDGE FIRST EPISTEMOLOGY STYLE: A REJOINDER TO SOME CRITICISMS

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0. Introduction

This paper presents some of the important intuitions of knowledge first epistemology which is one of the most interesting and promising developments in the contemporary epistemology[1]. It presents one of the interesting claims of Knowledge First Epistemology that justification is a species of knowledge: the view that one cannot have justification unless one has knowledge. Then it presents some criticisms that are raised by Christoph Kelp against such a view. Then this paper argues that there are difficulties with the arguments of Kelp. It argues that intuitions from the sociology of knowledge position and the central convictions of feminist epistemology would suggest that the argument of Kelp is fraught with serious difficulties.

Section 1 briefly discusses the project of traditional epistemology. Section 2 presents some of the important strands in contemporary epistemology and the status of knowledge first epistemology in it. Section 3 presents the central intuitions of *knowledge first epistemology*. Section 4 explores the notion of justification in the *knowledge first epistemology*. It also presents the difficulties preset in the knowledge first account of justification. It shows that if one were to hold justification as depended on knowledge, one cannot hold Gettier cases as cases were the agent is justified. Thus Gettier cases would be a counter example to the knowledge first account of justification. Section 5 presents some of the attempted solutions for the difficulties which the Gettier problem poses to the conception of justification in the *knowledge first* style. It also discusses the criticisms of Christooph Kelp against such responses. In section 6, the paper argues that

Kelp's criticisms are fraught with serious difficulties in the light of intuitions from sociology of knowledge and feminist epistemology. The paper is closes with a few concluding remarks in section 7.

1. The project of traditional epistemology

The central project of epistemology is to provide individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge (propositional knowledge). The conviction that belief, justification, and truth or something akin to these are the individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge survived in the history of western philosophy for a surprisingly long period of time. One can trace this idea to Plato's dialogue *Meno* where he suggests that knowledge is a true belief with an account. However, this definition of knowledge got thoroughly shaken by the counter-examples presented by Edmund Gettier[2]. Gettier's cases demonstrate that justification, truth, and belief are not jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge. Several similar examples are provided by many philosophers to argue for the same point. All these cases which are structurally similar to the examples of Gettier are referred to as *Gettier cases* or *Gettier kind of cases*.

The literature of epistemology is flooded with attempts to solve the predicament that Gettier cases pose: The Gettier problem. As a result of these attempts, the definitions of knowledge became increasingly complex and less intuitive. These accounts are far removed from the intuitions of common people. Such definitions are not one of those which will be readily recognised by an ordinary person and say "oh, yes! This is exactly what we mean by knowledge".

Linda Zagzebski[3] argues that Gettier problem cannot be solved. Zagzebski points out that the Gettier cases have a mutually canceling bad luck - good luck structure. She maintains that following this structure, one can come up with a recipe for preparing Gettier cases. And such cases, Zagzebski maintains, are not solvable.

One might feel that the non-solvability of Gettier cases and increasingly complex accounts of knowledge perhaps indicate that there is something deeply erroneous about

the very project of traditional epistemology. This is precisely what Timothy Williamson[4] and many other proponents of knowledge first epistemology[5] and other contemporary epistemologists argue.

2. Locating Knowledge First Epistemology in Contemporary Epistemology

Contemporary epistemology constitutes an ensemble of approaches and themes. Many of them significantly depart from the traditional approaches and/or themes. Contemporary epistemology witnesses a renewed attention on ethics of belief. The notion of practical reason – an important notion in Aristotle's philosophy – also has gained a lot of interest in the contemporary epistemology. Discussions on knowledge from testimony were relatively less in western epistemology. However, currently there are plenty of discussions happening on the social dimension of knowledge in general and testimonial knowledge in particular. Epistemic dysfunctions such as epistemic injustice in general and testimonial injustice in particular – topics which became popular due to Mirinda Fricker[6] - are also discussed widely in the contemporary epistemology. The epistemology of disagreement is another important topic of discussion in current time.

Naturalism in epistemology – of which Quine is a prominent proponent – has caused dubiety regarding the project of conceptual analysis of knowledge and its cognates. Virtue epistemology is another promising approach in contemporary epistemology. It is an attempt to characterise knowledge primarily in terms of the intellectual virtues of the agent. Like the naturalist project, virtue epistemology also does not attempt to provide a conceptual analysis of knowledge. However, unlike naturalism, virtue epistemology considers knowledge as a normative notion. Traditional epistemology considers belief as the locus of epistemic evaluation. By making a significant departure from this assumption, virtue epistemology takes the epistemic agent as the locus of epistemic normaivity.

Some of the virtue epistemologists - such as Linda Zagzebski[7] – hold that the entire project of the conceptual analysis of knowledge and the attempt to resolve the Gettier problem made epistemology impoverished. She holds that as epistemologists

were busy solving the Gettier problem, important epistemic notions such as wisdom, understanding etc. got largely neglected. One of the recent developments in epistemology namely 'Knowledge first epistemology' - which is advocated by Timonthy Williamson and others- holds that it is inevitable that the project of conceptual analysis of knowledge, which traditional epistemology is keen on, fails. This is because, unlike it is usually maintained, knowledge has no parts. Knowledge is a basic notion. Only a non-basic notion (which has parts) can be subjected to conceptual analysis (by splitting it into simpler parts).

The major role of knowledge first epistemology in contemporary epistemology is that it vehemently opposes the project of conceptual analysis which is lurking behind many of the contemporary epistemological approaches as well. It attempts to radically alter the epistemological landscape by maintaining that knowledge is an unanalysable term. The suggestion that the direction of the analysis involved in the traditional epistemology should be reversed and notions such as justification, belief etc. should be understood as species of knowledge is quite a radical one. So, in general, knowledge first epistemology raises serious suspicion about the some of the most fundamental assumptions of epistemology.

3. Knowledge First Epistemology

Timonthy Williamson maintains that Knowledge is a basic notion. Hence, one cannot provide an analysis of knowledge. So, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge to be unearthed. As we know, according to traditional epistemology, belief is conceptually prior to knowledge. However, in Williamson's view, knowledge is conceptually prior to belief. Therefore, Williamson's and many others who defend similar positions are called *knowledge-first epistemology*. In retrospect, the traditional epistemological account is often called *belief-first epistemology*.

Williamson rightly notes that all standard analysis of the notion of *knowledge* equates it with a combination of concepts such as *justification, truth, belief etc.*[8]. All such analyses, he adds, of *knows* is ''incorrect as a claim of concept identity, for the

analysing concept is distinct from the concept to be analysed''[9].

According to Williamson, knowledge is the most general factive state. Williamson says that ''knowing is the most general factive stative attitude, that which one has to a proposition if one has any factive stative attitude to it at all''[10]

Williamson considers knowledge to be a mental state. Truth is an important part of knowledge. However, it is not a mental concept. As truth is one of the conjuncts in almost all analyses of knowledge, and it is a non-mental concept, Williamson observes that there is a tension in the analyses of knowledge that are available thus far.

Many might feel that we have approximate definitions of knowledge that could be refined to achieve an optimal analysis. However, Williamson holds that "[T]he possibility of approximating knowledge in terms of belief and other concepts is not good evidence for the conceptual priority of belief over knowledge" [11]

From the inside, the mental state of belief and knowledge are the same (or minimally feel the same). Knowledge has an external component that belief can lack, namely factivity: knowledge stands or falls with facts. Williamson maintains that content externalism suggests that beliefs also have an external component. "Belief as attributed in ordinary language is a genuine mental state constitutively dependent on the external world"[12]. Thus, meaning is fixed by external components. According to this view, knowledge and beliefs are similar as both have a world connection. Thus, Williamson argues that maintaining that knowledge has a factivity component need not preclude it from being a mental state.

4. Justification and Knowledge: The Reversal of the Direction of Analysis

According to *Knowledge First epistemology*, rather than analysing knowledge in terms of justified belief, justified belief is analysed in terms of knowledge. Here, the direction of the analysis is reversed. According to this understanding, one can have justification only if one has knowledge. Here, justification is understood in terms of knowledge. Knowledge is a prerequisite for justification. Thus, justification is parasitic upon knowledge. This is a reversal of the direction of the traditional analyses of knowledge.

However, there are criticisms to this view of justification. For instance, Christoph Kelp[13] points out that this view of justification of *knowledge first epistemology* faces difficulties in addressing the intuitions of Gettier cases.

4.1 Justification and the Gettier Cases: Some Difficulties in the Knowledge First Approach

Christoph Kelp[14] notes that the Knowledge First Epistemologie's attempt to characterise justification as parasitic on knowledge faces difficulties. Consider the following example which Christoph Kelp adapts from Alvin Goldman[15].

> **Fake barn case**: You are driving through the countryside and take a look out of the window of your car. You see what appears to be a barn in the field and form a perceptual belief that you are looking at a barn. Unbeknownst to you, you are looking at one of the few real barns in an area peppered with barn facades that are so cleverly constructed as to be indistinguishable from real barns from your position on the road[16].

Kelp notes that, as we know, the important point which Gettier cases make is that the agents in these cases do not have knowledge. In the example given above, the agent does not know. He does not know that he is looking at a barn. However, the beliefs of the agents in the Gettier cases are justified. It is important to be so. Otherwise these cases would not be counter examples to the account of knowledge as justified true belief.

According to *Knowledge First Epistemology*, justified belief entails knowledge. This is so since, in this view, one can have justified belief only if they have knowledge. Kelp notes that for proponents of *Knowledge First Epistemology* to accept that the agents in Gettier cases lack knowledge, they will have to accept the counter-intuitive result that the beliefs of the agents in the Gettier cases are not justified. It flies in the face of the common-sensical understanding of what justification supposed to mean.

The same would be true even if the agent in the example mentioned above is not looking at a real barn (the 'Gettier counterpart cases' as Kelp calls it). For example, if

he had looked out of the window a couple of minutes earlier, he would have looked at a fake barn and would have held the belief that he is looking at a barn. Though the belief in this case is false, it s justified. Again, it would show that one can have justification without having knowledge. Thus, Christoph Kelp argues that the claim of *knowledge first epistemology* that justification is depended on knowledge is controversial, to say the least.

5. Response of Knowledge First Epistemology and Its Difficulties

The proponents of Knowledge first epistemology maintain that the agents in Gettier and Counterpart cases do not have justified beliefs. According to them, our intuitions that the agents in the Gettier cases are justified should not be trusted. This point is explained by making a distinction between 'being justified' and 'being blameless'. They hold that the agent in Gettier cases is blameless in forming the belief they did. It is not appropriate for blaming them for holding such beliefs. However, according to *Knowledge first epistemology*, the agents in the Gettier kind of cases are not epistemically justified in holding those beliefs[17].

It has been argued that this response given by the knowledge first epistemology fails to effectively address the criticism[18]. Christoh Kelp holds that the response fails mainly due to the reason that the distinction between 'justification' and 'blamelessness' made in the way explained above conflates a significant normative difference that is required to be made in epistemology.

To see this point, consider the following two cases:

> ***Insanity.*** You have gone insane. As a result, you form your beliefs in all sorts of crazy manners. When hearing the wind blow you think your long lost love is speaking to you, when the sky is red at sunset, you think that doom is impending, and so on[19].

> ***Benighted Isolation.*** You are part of an isolated and benighted community the members of which share a common belief that thunderstorms indicate that their twenty-eared deity is about to

scratch its largest left ear. Just now you are witnessing a thunderstorm and come to believe that the deity is about to scratch an ear[20].

The agent forms a blameless belief in the cases mentioned above. The following two principles for blamelessness can bolster this intuition.

P1: One is blameless for φ ing if it is out of one's control that one φ s;

P2: One is blameless for φ ing if one φ s in the light of good reason to believe that φ ing is permissible[21]

The case *Insanity* mentioned above is an example of P1. Here, the belief of the agent is beyond her control. She is out of her mind. Therefore, the agent should not be blamed for the kind of beliefs she hold. The case of *Benighted Isolation* mentioned above is an instance of P2. In this case, the agent's belief is formed in the light of good reason to believe that it is permissible. Kelp rightly notes these point as follows:

"After all, you reasonably believe that thunderstorms indicate ear-scratching and that a thunderstorm has occurred. If so you have good reason to believe that it is permissible for you believe as you do"[22].

However, Kelp argues[23] that there is a significant dissimilarity between agents in Gettier cases and the Counterpart cases on the one hand, and agents in cases like *Insanity* and *Benighted Isolation* on the other. Kelp rightly notes that the agents in the Gettier and the counterpart cases form their beliefs in epistemically fine ways. Those are the usual ways in which people acquire knowledge. That is, people reliably acquire knowledge through such means. On the contrary, Kelp argues, the agents in the examples *Insanity* and *Benighted Isolation* form their beliefs in epistemically unusual ways that are not reliable. Kelp contends that one is unlikely to end up with a true belief if one forms beliefs in the way depicted in these examples. Therefore, in Kelp's view, "…agents in the former cases are in a much stronger epistemic position than agents in the latter cases"[24].

One can understand this point of Kelp if one considers the Gettier kind of case *Fake barn case* which we referred to in section 3.2. In this case, the agent is deprived of

knowledge only because of a very unfortunate epistemic circumstance. The agent is not likely to come across such scenario very often. So, there is no serious behavioural changes that are required on the part of the agent as far as knowledge acquisition is concerned. On the other hand, Kelp argues, the agents in the examples *Insanity* and *Benighted Isolation*, the agents are in completely unfavourable epistemic situations. They are in completely wrong epistemic directions. They need serious changes in the way they form their beliefs.

To see this, compare, for example *Fake Barns* and *Benighted Isolation*. In *Fake Barns*, you are simply unlucky not to acquire knowledge on this occasion, whereas, in *Benighted Isolation* you fail to acquire knowledge because you are part of a community that is on the wrong epistemic track entirely. There is no serious epistemic readjustment that is required of the agents. They are on the right epistemic track. Thus, Kelp argues that the beliefs of the agents in the Gettier cases should be evaluated positively and the beliefs of the agents in the example *Insanity* and *Benighted Isolation* should be evaluated negatively. Kelp maintains that this distinction is a significant normative distinction in epistemology. Kelp eloquently put the significance of this distinction in the following manner.

> "To see that it makes sense to evaluate the beliefs of agents in Gettier and Counterpart cases positively, note that so doing will reinforce their ways of proceeding as epistemic agents, which is a good thing because agents will start to reap epistemic goods again as soon as they are back in epistemically more hospitable territories. In contrast, it makes sense to evaluate the beliefs of agents in cases like *Insanity* and *Benighted Isolation* negatively because so doing will discourage agents from continuing in their ways of proceeding as epistemic agents, which is also good thing given that no epistemic goods are to be gained by their way of proceeding"[25]

Thus, Kelp argues that the position of the proponents of the knowledge first epistemology - that the agents in the Getier cases are though blameless are not justified

- cannot be maintained.

6. Difficulties with Kelp's Position

Kelp's example *Benighted Isolation*, maintain that the entire community mentioned in this example are in an episemically wrong direction. He maintains that it fails as a community from an epistemic point of view. However, one might argue that this judgment is not as simple as it appears in the example of Kelp.

Those advocate the view that knowledge has to be understood as a sociological phenomenon[26] will raise objection to the verdict of Kelp. They would maintain that every society will have its own norms for knowledge production. Assessing the epistemic standards of another society by using the epistemic standards of one's own society is not fair. One should not simply presume that all other societies which follow epistemic norms that are different from one's own society are irrational. That is a very uncharitable position to hold. It might amount to epistemic naivety or epistemic arrogance as well.

The rebuttal of other's point of view, however strange it might appear to one, without argument is a result of biased thinking. Feminist epistemologists[27] would point out that this exactly the way in which epistemology has operated with andocentric assumptions. The "strange" and "feminine intuitions" are not taken seriously into consideration. The results from experimental philosophy[28] also suggest that how different the notion of knowledge is across various cultures. Diversities such as that of gender, races etc. are observed in these results. All these suggest that to claim that the agents in the case mentioned do not have knowledge, and to prejudicially call the society as a benighted one can be unacceptable.

7. Conclusion

This paper presented the central intuitions of Knowledge first epistemology. In particular, it discussed the notion of justification in knowledge first style: the view that justification is parasitic upon knowledge. Some of the difficulties of this position with respect to Gettier cases are presented. A knowledge first epistemology response to this predicament and Christoph Kelp's criticisms of it are presented. This paper responds to

the criticism of Kelp. The paper argues that there are difficulties with the arguments of Kelp that Gettier cases are a stumbling block for the knowledge first conception of justification. It argues that the intuitions of the proponents of sociology of knowledge and feminist epistemologists significantly undermine the arguments of Kelp.

Notes and References

[1] A previous version of this paper was presented at the Department of Philosophy, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. I thank the participants of the seminar for their valuable comments.

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[17] Ibid, p.5

[18] Ibid, p.5

[19] Ibid p.5

[20] Ibid p.5

[21] Ibid, p.5

[22] Ibid, p.6

[23] Ibid

[24] Ibid p.7.

[25] Ibid p.6.

[26] E.g. David Bloor, "The strengths of the strong programme." *Scientific rationality: The sociological turn* (Springer Netherlands, 1984) pp. 75-94.; Barnes, Bary *Scientific Knowledge and Sociological Theory*, London; Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1974.

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[28] Due to Stephen Stich etc.