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IS KNOWLEDGE THE ABILITY TO ϕ FOR THE REASON THAT P?

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ABSTRACT

Hyman (1999, 2006) argues that knowledge is best conceived as a kind of ability: S knows that *p* iff S can ϕ for the reason that *p*. Hyman motivates this thesis by appealing to Gettier cases. I argue that it is counterexampled by a certain kind of Gettier case where the fact that *p* is a cause of the subject's belief that *p*. One can ϕ for the reason that *p* even if one does not know that *p*. So knowledge is not best conceived as an ability of this kind.

1. INTRODUCTION

We can draw a distinction between two types of Gettier cases; those in which one's belief that *p* is caused, at least in part, by the fact that *p*, and those where one's belief is causally unconnected to the fact that *p*. The former type causes trouble for a popular thesis linking reasons and knowledge:

reasons-knowledge thesis: The fact that *p* can be S's reason for ϕ-ing iff S knows that *p*

The above formulation of the thesis is taken from Hyman (1999, 2006). The thesis is central to his claim that knowledge is best understood as a kind of ability: to know that *p* is to have the ability to ϕ for the reason that *p*. The thesis is also endorsed by Williamson (2000), Hornsby (2007), and Littlejohn (forthcoming). Neta (2009) and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) express sympathy to it, and Unger (1975) appeals to it to argue that nobody has a reason for doing, thinking, or feeling anything, since, he argues, nobody knows anything. I'll first sketch Hyman's motivation for the thesis, and then explain the distinction between 'causal' and 'non-causal' Gettier cases (as I'll call them). I'll then argue that causal Gettier cases undermine the thesis.[1] My interest here is not so much in the theory of reasons, as it is in a question about knowledge. Recent epistemology has, to a large extent, turned away from the project of attempting a conceptual analysis of knowledge, and towards investigation of the normative and metaphysical roles knowledge might uniquely play. To this end it has been argued that knowledge is, variously, the 'norm' of belief (Sutton 2007), assertion (Williamson 2000), and practical reasoning (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). Williamson (2000) has also argued that one's evidence consists of all and only those propositions

1 I'll assume along with these authors that facts can be reasons for the purposes of this article. Though this is, of course, not uncontroversial.

one knows to be true ('E = K'). The purpose of this article is to argue that, whatever other roles knowledge might play, uniquely enabling one to ϕ for the reason that *p* is not amongst them. *Contra* Hyman, knowing that *p* is not best understood as the ability to act for the reason that *p*. Given this focus, my goals are circumscribed. I hope only to show that knowledge does not uniquely play this role. I do not propose a rival epistemology of acting-for-reasons. Indeed, I see no *prima facie* reason to expect that there exists a true biconditional linking the ability to ϕ for the reason that *p* and any unique epistemic state.

2. MOTIVATING THE REASONS-KNOWLEDGE THESIS

In order to motivate the necessity direction of the reasons-knowledge thesis, Hyman (1999, 2006) asks us to consider an example of a justified true belief which falls short of knowledge. Henry's belief is Gettiered:

> Henry is watching the television on a June afternoon. It is Wimbledon men's finals day, and the television shows McEnroe beating Connors; the score is two sets to love and match point to McEnroe in the third. McEnroe wins the point. Henry believes justifiably that:
>
> 1. I have just seen McEnroe win this year's Wimbledon final
>
> and reasonably infers that:
>
> 2. McEnroe is this year's Wimbledon champion
>
> Actually, however, the cameras at Wimbledon have ceased to function, and the television is showing a recording of last year's match. But while it does so McEnroe is in the process of repeating last year's slaughter. So Henry's belief (2) is true, and surely he is justified in believing (2). But we would hardly allow that Henry knows (2). (1999: 447)

Hyman then asks us to suppose that Henry recalls that his brother placed a £100 bet on McEnroe winning, and so infers that his brother has won £100. Is the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion Henry's reason for believing that his brother has won £100? Clearly not, thinks Hyman. His reason, Hyman claims, is only that he *believes* that McEnroe is this year's champion. Similarly, the fact that McEnroe won cannot be Henry's reason for being happy, angry, smug, or for congratulating his brother. Hyman takes cases like this to show that *p* can be one's reason for ϕ-ing only if one *knows* that *p*. Whenever one bears an epistemic relation to *p* weaker than knowledge – justified true belief, unjustified true belief, justified false belief, unjustified false belief – one's reason for ϕ-ing is not *p* itself, but something else. Similar considerations motivate the other authors who subscribe to the reasons-knowledge thesis (at least those who try to motivate it, rather than just endorse it – I'm thinking in particular of Unger (1975) and Hornsby (2007)).[2] Hyman goes on to argue that, given the reasons-knowledge thesis, knowledge is best conceived as a kind of ability: the ability to ϕ for the reason that *p*.

2 Unger (1975) also appeals to linguistic data about the felicity of assertions to argue for the thesis. I won't discuss this here.

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Although it hasn't been remarked upon before, the point extends to other cases of non-knowledge-constituting justified true beliefs that don't have the kind of double-luck structure found in Gettier cases.[3] Consider the following:

> Sarah holds a ticket in a 1 million ticket lottery where only one ticket will win, and every ticket has an equal chance of winning. The draw has been made, and Sarah's ticket did not win, but Sarah has not seen the results yet. On the basis of the probabilities involved, Sarah believes that her ticket is a loser.

Many epistemologists have found it natural to say that Sarah's belief that her ticket is a loser is justified when based on the probabilities involved, but not knowledge (Kyburg 1970; Klein 1985; Foley 1993; Lewis 1996; Hawthorne 2004; Pritchard 2007).[4] Insofar as it is, Sarah has a justified true belief that her ticket is a loser, but does not know this. Now suppose that upon forming her belief that her ticket is a loser, Sarah becomes disappointed. Is the fact that her ticket is a loser Sarah's reason for being disappointed? Surely it is not.

3. TWO TYPES OF GETTIER CASE

Hyman's McEnroe case is a Gettier case where the subject's belief that *p* is entirely causally unrelated to the fact that *p*. But not all Gettier cases have this feature. There are cases of Gettiered justified true belief where the fact that *p* is among the causes of the subject's belief. Goldman's (1976) *Fake Barns* case is of this kind:

> Henry is driving through the countryside looking at objects off the road. He sees what looks to him exactly like a barn. In fact it is a barn, but unbeknownst to Henry, he is in 'fake barns' country – an area with only a few real barns and many barn facades designed to look exactly like real barns to passing motorists. Luckily for Henry, he happens to look at one of the only real barns in the area. Henry's belief is justified and true, but not an item of knowledge.

What's the difference between the two cases? In *Fake Barns*, the fact that there is a barn is (along with various facts about Henry) one of the causes of Henry's belief that there is a barn. It figures in a causal explanation of why Henry believes what he does. By contrast, in Hyman's McEnroe case, the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion is *not* amongst the causes of Henry's belief that he is. It has no place in a causal explanation of why Henry believes what he does. Many Gettier cases have this causal-disconnect feature. Consider Chisholm's (1966) *sheep in the field* case. You are standing outside a field looking in. You see what looks to you exactly like a sheep, but is in fact a dog cleverly disguised as a sheep. You form the belief 'there is a sheep in the field'. Actually there is a sheep in the field. But it is hidden from view to you behind a hill. Your belief is both justified

3 The double luck is this: the subject is *unlucky* to be in a scenario that is not conducive to knowledge acquisition, but then *lucky* to have their belief turn out to be true. Zagzebski (1994) was, to my knowledge, the first to notice that Gettier cases have this structure. The lottery case differs from typical Gettier cases in that intuitively it is not a matter of luck that Sarah's belief that her ticket is a loser turns out to be true.

4 This is controversial though. See Sutton (2007), Smithies (2012) and Smith (2010) for the dissenting view that such lottery beliefs are not justified. I won't take a stand on this issue here.

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and true, but not knowledge. Like the McEnroe case, but unlike *Fake Barns*, the fact that there is a sheep in the field is entirely causally unrelated to your belief that there is a sheep in the field. Gettier cases come in two varieties: causal and non-causal.[5]

4. COUNTEREXAMPLES TO THE REASONS-KNOWLEDGE THESIS

I agree with Hyman that in his case the fact McEnroe is this year's champion can't be Henry's reason for ϕ-ing. But I reject the reasons-knowledge thesis because I think it is counterexampled by causal Gettier cases. In order to see how such cases cause problems for the knowledge-reasons thesis, we can adapt the McEnroe case as follows:

> Henry is watching the television on a June afternoon. It is Wimbledon men's finals day, and the television shows McEnroe beating Connors; the score is two sets to love and match point to McEnroe in the third. McEnroe wins the point. Henry believes justifiably that:
>
> 1. I have just seen McEnroe win this year's Wimbledon final
>
> and reasonably infers that:
>
> 2. McEnroe is this year's Wimbledon champion
>
> Henry really is watching this year's final. However, due to a network error, all other TV's in the country, including the TV's in Henry's kitchen and bedroom, and the other TV in his lounge just next to the one he is watching, are showing the final from two years ago, in which Connors staged an incredible last-ditch comeback to win the match. Only the TV that Henry is watching has been spared from the error. Henry justifiably and truly believes that McEnroe is this year's Wimbledon champion, but he doesn't know this, because he could have very easily falsely believed that Connors is.[6]

Here Henry's belief that McEnroe is this year's champion is caused, in part, by the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion. As before, suppose that Henry recalls that his brother placed a £100 bet on McEnroe winning, and so infers that his brother has won £100. Is the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion Henry's reason for believing

5 Pritchard (2008) argues that Gettier cases can involve two different kinds of luck –'intervening luck' and 'environmental luck'. He cashes out the distinction in terms of cognitive abilities; in environmental luck, but not intervening luck, cases, your achievement of having a true belief that *p* is a result of your cognitive ability. Pritchard thinks that *Fake Barn* cases are cases of environmental luck, and would classify Hyman's McEnroe case, and Chisholm's sheep in the field case, as cases of intervening luck. There will undoubtedly be a large overlap between environmental luck Gettier cases and causal Gettier cases, but it's an open question whether the two types are necessarily co-extensional.

6 This is a somewhat non-standard type of Gettier case insofar as Henry could not have easily falsely believed the proposition 'McEnroe is this year's Wimbledon champion', but rather could have easily had a false belief concerning the answer to the question 'Who is this year's Wimbledon champion?'. In this respect it more closely resembles Gilbert Harman's (1973) 'Dead dictator' case than normal Gettier cases. I take it, however, that we will nevertheless want to deny knowledge to Henry here, despite the fact that he has a justified true belief. If the reader has concerns about appeals to this kind of case, they should note that the next case that I'm about to discuss does not have this non-standard structure. It is a straightforward *Fake Barns*-style case.

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that his brother has won £100? Unlike in the previous case, it seems obvious to me that it *is*. Similarly, were Henry to be happy, angry, or smug, or congratulate his brother, it seems clear to me that the fact that McEnroe is this year's champion would be Henry's reason for being happy, angry, or smug, or for congratulating his brother. If this is right, then, since Henry does not know that McEnroe is this year's champion, we have a counterexample to the reasons-knowledge thesis.[7] To be sure, this is a straightforward appeal to intuition. But the same is true of Hyman's argument for the reasons-knowledge thesis. And since intuition appears not to unequivocally support the thesis, we should be reluctant to accept it.

The intuitive verdict extends, I think, to many other causal Gettier cases. Consider, for example, the following variation on the *Fake Barns* case:

> Henry is out hiking. He's lost, and the weather is turning nasty. The situation is getting serious. He sees what he believes to be a hiker's hut in the distance, and feels relieved. In fact, unbeknownst to Henry, he is in fake hiker's-hut county – an area where there are only a handful of real huts, and many hut-facades designed to look exactly like real huts to passing hikers. Henry justifiably and truly believes that the structure in the distance is a hut, but he does not know this.

Is the fact that there is a hut in the distance Henry's reason for being relieved? Intuitively, I submit, it is. If that's right, then the reasons-knowledge thesis is false.[8]

5. SUMMING UP

I've argued that certain kinds of Gettier cases – those where the fact that *p* causes the subject's belief that *p* – give us cause to be reluctant in accepting the reasons-knowledge thesis. This is perhaps not surprising, since locutions of the form 'his reason for ϕ-ing was *p*' can usually be replaced *salva veritate* with 'he ϕ-ed because *p*'. Such considerations suggest that the subject's lack of knowledge is epiphenomena in the kinds of cases that have been appealed to motivate the reasons-knowledge thesis. What was really driving our intuitions was the lack of a causal connection between the subject's belief that *p* and the fact that *p*. Does this mean that we can truthfully replace the reasons-knowledge thesis with a different biconditional linking an epistemic state with the ability to ϕ for the reason that *p*? Perhaps one with a causal condition? Maybe. Maybe not. There is no reason to, it seems to me, simply *assume* that such a true biconditional exists. But the matter ought to be investigated further. That project is not taken up here, however, for even without a rival account we have good grounds on which to reject the claim that knowledge plays the role

7 To be clear, the claim here is that in this case the fact that *p* can not only be an *explanatory* reason for Henry's ϕ-ing, but also his *motivating* reason.

8 I should note that some epistemologists – e.g. Hetherington (1998), Lycan (2006) – have rejected the received view that *Fake Barns* style cases are non-knowledge cases. I don't share their judgment, but I won't get into the issue here. I think it's fair to say that the view that Fake *Barns* cases are knowledge cases is a minority view. But if you hold it, then you should take the lesson of this article to be, not that the reasons-knowledge thesis is false, but rather that it is problematic to jointly endorse *both* the reasons-knowledge thesis *and* the view that *Fake Barns* style cases are not knowledge cases. If you are particularly drawn to the reasons-knowledge thesis you might even think that the fact that *Fake Barns* cases are incompatible with the reasons-knowledge thesis gives us some reason to think that such cases *are* cases of knowledge.

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of uniquely enabling one to ϕ for the reason that p. We should not conceive of knowledge as an ability of this kind.[9]

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