

EPISTEMOLOGIA CONTEMPORÂNEA EM DEBATE

Post-Gettier Epistemology*

Epistemologia Pós-Gettier

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Abstract: In this paper, it is argued that the differences between Gettier-era epistemology and post-Gettier epistemology can be largely traced to differences in methodology. We will give a “rational reconstruction” of how we did things then, what we do now, and what considerations moved us to do things differently. In summary form, during the Gettier era the methodology of epistemology was roughly what Chisholm called “particularism” and Rawls called “the method of reflective equilibrium.” Various developments forced an abandonment of this Gettier era methodology, in favor of several new constraints on an adequate theory of knowledge. Questions about the nature of epistemic normativity, the relations between knowledge and action, the value of knowledge, and the social dimensions of knowledge, all became important for adjudicating among competing theories of knowledge. This was appropriate in that the older methodology was inadequate. The new methodology accounts for the increased richness and depth that we see in epistemology today.

Keywords: Gettier-Era Epistemology. Post-Gettier Epistemology. Methodology in Epistemology.

Resumo: Neste ensaio, argumenta-se que as diferenças entre a epistemologia da era Gettier e a epistemologia pós-Gettier podem ser amplamente reduzidas a diferenças em metodologia. Faremos uma “reconstrução racional” do modo como fazíamos as coisas então, do modo como fazemos agora e de quais considerações nos levaram a fazer as coisas de modo diferente. Em resumo, durante a era Gettier

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a metodologia da epistemologia era basicamente o que Chisholm chamou de “particularismo” e Rawls chamou de “o método do equilíbrio reflexivo”. Diversos desenvolvimentos forçaram o abandono dessa metodologia da era Gettier, em favor de diversas novas exigências a uma teoria adequada do conhecimento. Perguntas sobre a natureza da normatividade epistêmica, as relações entre conhecimento e ação, o valor do conhecimento e as dimensões sociais do conhecimento, todas essas se tornaram importantes para julgar entre teorias do conhecimento em competição. Com efeito, isso se mostrou apropriado, uma vez que a metodologia antiga era de fato inadequada. A nova metodologia contempla a maior riqueza e profundidade que vemos na epistemologia hodierna.

Palavras-chave: Epistemologia da era Gettier. Epistemologia pós-Gettier. Metodologia da epistemologia.

Analytic epistemology looks different today than it did during the twenty-five years or so after Edmund Gettier’s paper¹, what we might call “Gettier-era epistemology.” How so? And how did we get here? I want to argue that the differences between Gettier-era epistemology and post-Gettier epistemology can be largely traced to differences in methodology. In what follows, I will give a “rational reconstruction” of how we did things then, what we do now, and what considerations moved us to do things differently.

In summary form, the story goes like this: During the Gettier era, the methodology of epistemology was roughly what Chisholm called “particularism” and Rawls called “the method of reflective equilibrium.”² The driving concern of this kind of methodology was to get the extension of the concept right, i.e. to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s counting as a case of knowledge. Various developments forced an abandonment of this Gettier era methodology, in favor of several new constraints on an adequate theory of knowledge. Specifically, questions about the nature of epistemic normativity, the relations between knowledge and action, the value of knowledge, and the social dimensions of knowledge, all became important for adjudicating among competing theories of knowledge. This was appropriate, I will argue, in

¹ See GETTIER, Edmund, Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?, in: *Analysis*, 23:6 (1963), p. 121-123.

² See CHISHOLM, Roderick M., *The Problem of the Criterion*, in: IDEM, *The Foundations of Knowing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982; RAWLS, John, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

that the older methodology was inadequate – not only for adjudicating among competing accounts, but also for realizing philosophical ambitions regarding informativeness and understanding. The new methodology (or methodologies) also accounts for the increased richness and depth that we see in epistemology today.

1 Gettier-Era Epistemology

Long before Gettier's 1963 paper, philosophers wanted an account of knowledge. This would be, ideally, a set of reasonably elegant, necessary, sufficient and informative conditions. Conditions would be informative to the extent that they gave us insight into "what knowledge is," or what "makes it the case" that something is or is not knowledge. Sometimes the quest for an informative account was considered to be an exercise in metaphysics, i.e. an investigation into the thing itself, or the property itself. Other times philosophers saw themselves as doing conceptual or linguistic analysis. Often the project was left vague in these terms. Nevertheless, the broader project was to gain philosophical insight into what knowledge is, or how we employ the concept, or how we use the word, and it was thought that the way to do this was to provide necessary, sufficient and informative conditions.

When Gettier's paper was published in 1963, there was at that time a rough consensus that knowledge is justified true belief. That is,

S knows that P just in case

- (1) P is true;
- (2) S believes that P; and
- (3) S is justified in believing that P (roughly understood as: S has adequate evidence for P; S has the right to be sure that P is true)³.

As is well known, Gettier proceeded to provide two counterexamples to this account (often called the JTB account of knowledge), each purporting to show that the account fails to state sufficient conditions. Gettier's counterexamples and his assessment that the account is insufficient were largely accepted, and the next several decades saw a series of attempted fixes, as well as counterexamples to these. Over fifty years after the publication of Gettier's paper, there is still no consensus regarding how to fix up or replace the JTB account⁴.

³ See GETTIER, Edmund, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, op. cit., p. 121. Gettier cites A. J. Ayer and Roderick M. Chisholm as adherents of the account.

⁴ For an overview of early responses to Gettier's paper, see SHOPE, Robert K., *The Analysis of Knowledge: A Decade of Research*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983.

And yet, epistemology in the early part of the twenty-first century is alive and well, even flourishing, the absence of such a consensus notwithstanding. One goal of this paper is to explain how this happened. As I suggested early, epistemology's character today, as well as its current state of flourishing, can be largely explained by a shift in methodology that defines our post-Gettier era. But before getting to the new methodology, it is important to understand Gettier-era methodology.

2 The Old Methodology: Particularism and Reflective Equilibrium

In "The Problem of the Criterion," Chisholm defines "particularism" and "methodism" in terms of two questions central to the theory of knowledge:

- A. Which particular cases count as knowledge, and which do not?
- B. What are the general principles that describe what we can know and what we cannot?

The particularist thinks that we can begin with an answer to A and then work out an answer to B. As such, the particularist gives methodological privilege to our intuitions about particular cases. By contrast, the "methodist" thinks that we can begin with an answer to B and then work out an answer to A. That is, the methodist gives methodological privilege to our intuitions about general principles. Understood this way, particularism and methodism are alternative methodologies in epistemology. They are recommendations regarding where we should begin our theorizing and how theory construction should proceed. Chisholm cites Thomas Reid and G. E. Moore as particularists. This is because both began by taking it for granted that we know many things, and that we do not know others, and both evaluated philosophical theories according to how well they respected those methodological starting points. By contrast, Chisholm identified Locke and Hume as methodists, since they began with their empiricist principles regarding what can and cannot be known, and then evaluated claims about particular cases accordingly, even when doing so entailed skeptical consequences that go contrary to common sense⁵.

Why choose particularism over methodism as a methodology? The most straightforward reason is that we seem to be better at making judgments about particular cases than we are about philosophical principles. This is evidenced by a long history of failed philosophical principles, many of which can be rightly viewed as absurd. Moreover,

⁵ See CHISHOLM, Roderick M., *op. cit.*, 1982.

ability to judge well in particular cases can be explained more or less straightforwardly, in terms of normal conceptual and/or linguistic competence. We can also make a weaker point: that only our intuitions about particular cases have even a chance of being generally reliable, since at least there is good pre-theoretical consensus about which cases count as knowledge and which do not. But there is no consensus regarding philosophical principles at all, and so no chance that we are generally reliable at correctly formulating these. In the end, then, particularism embodies a kind of philosophical humility: at least at the start of philosophical theorizing, this methodology recommends, we ought to privilege our common sense judgments about particular cases over speculation about general philosophical principles.

What about the method of reflective equilibrium? This methodology recommends that we begin with *both* our intuitions about particular cases and our intuitions about general principles, and that we bring these into a coherent equilibrium. On this view, neither our intuitions about particular cases nor our intuitions about general principles should be privileged methodologically⁶. Accordingly, the method of reflective equilibrium constitutes a third methodology alongside particularism and methodism. One might think that this is splitting hairs – that a charitable reading of particularism makes it equivalent with the method of reflective equilibrium. For even particularists are willing to give up some intuitions about particular cases in favor of overall coherence. But if we look at the considerations that adherents have invoked in favor of particularism over methodism, we see that those same considerations favor particularism over the method of reflective equilibrium. For what particularists hold is that our intuitions about particular cases ought to be *privileged* over philosophical theories. According to Moore, “the fact that, if Hume’s argument were true, I could not know of the existence of this pencil, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of those principles.”⁷ According to Reid, “though common sense and external senses demand my assent to their dictates upon their own authority, yet philosophy is not entitled to this privilege.”⁸ The point that Reid and Moore are making here is that our common sense intuitions and philosophical principles are not on a par. On the contrary,

⁶ The label is due to RALWS, John, *A Theory of Justice* 1971. Rawls attributes the method to GOODMAN, Nelson, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955, although Goodman does not use that label.

⁷ See MOORE, G. E., Hume’s Theory Examined, in: IDEM, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1953, p. 136.

⁸ See REID, Thomas, *Philosophical Works*, Hildesheim: ed. H. M. Bracken/Georg Olms, 1983, p. 302-303.

our philosophical theories are inconsistent and parochial, and, as such, they have nothing to recommend them as a methodological starting point. All this speaks in favor of particularism over methodism, but it also speaks in favor of particularism over the method of reflective equilibrium.

What particularism and the method of reflective equilibrium have in common, however, is the claim that our intuitions about particular cases should constrain philosophical theorizing. Moreover, epistemological theories are to be *evaluated* according to how well they preserve our pre-theoretical intuitions about particular cases. In this way, such intuitions act as a kind of “data” that our theories ought to respect. Let’s call this common ground between the two methodologies “intuitionism.” Epistemology in the Gettier era was largely driven by Chisholm’s particularism and by intuitionism more broadly. That is, theories in this era were largely evaluated by how well they respected our pre-theoretical intuitions about particular cases. This, of course, explains the character of much of the literature in that period. Famously, epistemology in the Gettier era was driven by counterexamples to proposed analyses, inspiring revised proposals followed by new counterexamples. The method of counterexample is in fact the method of intuitionism: the point is to show that a given proposal does not respect our pre-theoretical intuitions about some case or cases.

3 Challenges to the Old Methodology

One worry about particularism, and about intuitionism more broadly, is that such methodologies tend to generate superficial epistemologies. Specifically, these methodologies emphasize getting our extensions right, but an analysis might do that while failing to generate philosophical insight or understanding. That is, an analysis might successfully state necessary and sufficient conditions, but without getting at the nature of things, or getting at essences, or “cutting things at the joints.” That such is the case is suggested by the inelegance of many of the analyses generated during the Gettier era. Famously, accounts of knowledge in that period became increasingly more complex and *ad hoc*, creating the impression that intuitions were being accommodated but not explained. But philosophy strives for explanation, and for the understanding that comes with explanation. Epistemology during the Gettier era seemed to stray from these central philosophical aims.

A second worry about particularism and intuitionism is that our pre-theoretical intuitions about cases underdetermine theory. That is, any number of proposals might do equally well (or equally badly) explaining the relevant “data.” Of course, the idea that data underdetermines

theory here is old news, but the problem seems worse in the context of a “Gricean turn” in the philosophy of language. In short, Grice showed that we cannot simply read off meaning from use. On the contrary, our linguistic intuitions are governed not only by the semantic content of assertions, but also by pragmatic considerations as well.

Here is a non-epistemic example to illustrate the point. Suppose that you are an event organizer and you call your employee to ask how many people are at a party you are hosting. Suppose that your employee answers, “There are three people in the room,” when in fact there are over one hundred. Many people will have the intuition that what the employee asserted was false. But as a matter of fact, what she asserted was true. For if there are over one hundred people in the room, there must be three people in the room. And so, literally speaking, her assertion was true. What is wrong with her assertion is not that it is false but that it is misleading. It is misleading because it is natural for you to infer from her statement that there are *only* three people in the room. The naturalness of your inference is nicely explained by Gricean conversational maxims governing implicature. For example, Grice’s *Maxim of Quantity* is to be as informative as required by the conversational context. Your employee’s assertion violates this maxim, since her statement that there are three people in the room is not as informative as it should be in response to your question.

Now let’s consider an example from epistemology. In his “A Defense of Common Sense,” Moore asserts that he knows several things, such as *that here is a hand, that I have parents, and that I have never been far from the surface of the earth*⁹. Wittgenstein notes the common intuition that there is something odd about Moore’s claims to know such things, and tries to diagnose the problem in purely semantic terms. On Wittgenstein’s account, Moore’s claims violate the *meaning* of “knows,” and hence they are literally false. Alternatively, they are nonsense, or meaningless¹⁰. A Gricean perspective suggests an alternative diagnosis of the problem, however, now in terms of pragmatics rather than semantics. Specifically, one might think that Moore’s claims to know such things are literally true, but inappropriate in normal conversational contexts. For example, in normal contexts it is simply assumed that everyone knows such things, and so asserting that one knows is not informative.

The relevance of all this to present concerns is that it complicates the data that we are working with when we assess our intuitions

⁹ See MOORE, G. E., A Defense of Common Sense, in: IDEM, *Philosophical Papers*, New York: Collier Books, 1962.

¹⁰ See WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969.

about particular cases. The data is that there is *something* wrong with Moore's claim to know these things. But is it *false* that Moore knows them, or simply inapt to assert that he knows them? Put differently, should a good theory of knowledge rule that Moore does know these things, or should it rule that he does not? We don't know, until we have decided between a semantic or pragmatic diagnosis of the "something is wrong" intuition. More to the point, we won't agree on how our theory of knowledge should handle these cases until we agree on a semantic or pragmatic diagnosis. The moral of the story is this: our intuitions about cases grossly underdetermine theory choice, and even more severely than was understood in a pre-Gricean framework.

A third challenge to particularism comes from so-called experimental philosophy (or X-phi), and the skepticism that it generates about the evidential quality of our intuitions about cases. Thus several empirical studies suggest that the intuitions of trained philosophers are not replicated in non-philosophers. Moreover, these studies purport to show that there is considerable cultural variance in people's intuitions about cases, including Gettier cases, suggesting that philosophers' intuitions are merely parochial rather than evidential. There has been considerable debate about the soundness of such studies, as well as debate about how their results, if sound, should be interpreted. But the overall effect is to problematize the methodologies of particularism and intuitionism¹¹.

In sum, a methodology that relies so heavily on our pre-theoretical intuitions about cases now seems inadequate. Such intuitions severely underdetermine theory choice, and they are now considered more suspect than they used to be. Moreover, correctly organizing our intuitions, even when sound, does not guarantee philosophical insight or understanding. Ideally, we would like additional traction for building and adjudicating theories. We would like more constraints on our theorizing. I now want to argue that epistemology in the post-Gettier era has found such constraints, and can largely be characterized in terms of them.

4 The New Methodology

In this section I will discuss several methodological constraints that characterize post-Gettier epistemology, and then suggest that together these suggest a compelling framework for epistemological theorizing.

¹¹ For an overview and several discussions, see KNOBE, Joshua and NICHOLS, Shaun (eds.), *Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

4.1 The Value of Knowledge

The first constraint that characterizes post-Gettier epistemology is renewed concern with explaining the value of knowledge¹². Thus Jonathan Kvanvig argues that any theory of knowledge should be evaluated, in part, by considering how well it explains knowledge's special value. Put differently, a theory of knowledge that fails to explain the value of knowledge can be judged inadequate for that very reason. In this respect, Kvanvig argues, considerations about the nature and value of knowledge are not independent of each other¹³. Likewise, Linda Zagzebski argues that an adequate account of the nature of knowledge ought to explain why knowledge is valuable, and she criticizes reliabilist theories on that score¹⁴, and in a similar vein, Timothy Williamson suggests that one strike against Gettier era analyses of knowledge is precisely that they fail to explain the value of knowledge. Specifically, argues Williamson, the complexity and inelegance of such accounts make the value of knowledge mysterious¹⁵.

To see the force of these considerations, it is perhaps necessary to get clearer about the kind of value that knowledge is supposed to have. Thus, it is not difficult to explain the *practical* value of knowledge. For example, the possession of true beliefs clearly has practical value, and since knowledge entails true belief, it has that kind of value straight for wardly. But as Socrates insists in the *Meno*, knowledge seems to have a special value, over and above the practical value of true belief or true opinion. And so the “value problem” should be framed accordingly. In fact, one might argue, we have several value problems. Among other things, we can ask:

Why (and in what sense) is knowledge valuable at all?

Why is knowledge *more* valuable than mere true belief?

Why is knowledge *intrinsically* valuable (valuable in itself)?

Why is knowledge *finally* valuable (valuable as an end rather than merely as a means)¹⁶?

¹² I say “renewed” because questions about the value of knowledge go back at least to Plato's *Meno*. Thus post-Gettier epistemology returns to this perennial concern.

¹³ See KVANVIG, Jonathan, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁴ See ZAGZEBSKI, Linda, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹⁵ See WILLIAMSON, Timothy, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

¹⁶ See PRITCHARD, Duncan, Recent Work on Epistemic Value, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 44 (2007), p. 85-110; IDEM, The Value of Knowledge. In: ZALTA, Edward (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/knowledge-value/>>; and GRECO, John, Epistemic Value, in: BERNECKER, Sven and PRITCHARD, Duncan (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, New York: Routledge, 2010.

Theories of knowledge can be evaluated according to how well they explain these various dimensions of the value of knowledge.

4.2 Knowledge and Assertion

A second constraint on theories of knowledge concerns the intimate relations between knowledge and assertion. A strong characterization of such a relation is captured by the following “knowledge norm” of assertion:

KNA. Assert that p only if you know that p.

At first glance, KNA might seem obviously restrictive. But evidence for the norm is impressive. Most notably, a common and seemingly appropriate response to assertions is to ask, “How do you know?” Likewise, pointing out that one does not know is often an appropriate criticism of an assertion. KNA also fits well with the idea that testimony transmits knowledge, and with various Gricean themes regarding conversational implicature. There is a burgeoning literature here, for and against “the knowledge account of assertion.”¹⁷ But few would deny that there is some intimate relation between knowledge and assertion. An adequate theory of knowledge ought to account for this.

4.3 Knowledge and Action

A related constraint concerns the relations among knowledge, action and practical reasoning. Once again, a number of philosophers have characterized the relationship in terms of norms of action and/or norms of practical reasoning. Thus all of the following norms have been defended (and criticized) in the recent literature:

Act only on what you know.

If you know that p, then you can act on p.

You can act on p if and only if you know that p.

If you know that p, then you can use p as a premise in your practical reasoning.

Evidence for such norms includes considerations analogous to those in favor of a knowledge norm of assertion. For example, asking, “Do you know that?” is almost always appropriate when someone offers a reason for acting. Likewise, “You didn’t know that” is almost always an appropriate criticism when someone acts for a reason, and “I knew that” is almost always a justification. Once again, there is interesting and growing literature here, both for and against various knowledge-action norms. But also again, few would deny that there are intimate relations

¹⁷ For an overview, see GOLDBERG, Sanford, Recent Work on Assertion, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 52:4 (2015), p. 393-408.

among knowledge, action and practical reasoning. An adequate theory of knowledge ought to account for this as well¹⁸.

4.4 Why Do We Have a Concept of Knowledge?

As we saw above, post-Gettier epistemology shows renewed concern with questions regarding the value of knowledge. Related questions concern the point or purpose of the *concept* of knowledge and knowledge *language*. This kind of question is raised by Edward Craig in his seminal work, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. Arguing for a new methodology in epistemology, Craig's idea is that understanding the purpose of the concept of knowledge should give us insight into what knowledge is. For we can ask, what would the content of the concept have to be like for the concept to serve that purpose? In engineering, the slogan is "form follows function." Likewise for concepts, Craig argues. In this case, content follows function¹⁹.

Craig then proposes the following substantive thesis: A central purpose of the concept of knowledge is to flag good information and good sources of information for purposes of practical reasoning and action. The need for such a concept is grounded in our life as deeply social, highly information dependent beings. Craig's proposal is that the concept of knowledge serves the informational needs associated with our kind of social-practical life.

But now we can ask, what must the content of the concept of knowledge be like, for the concept to serve that function? Better: What must knowledge be like, assuming that the concept of knowledge does perform that function? An adequate theory of knowledge ought to give a plausible answer to this question. More generally, it should not leave it a mystery as to how the concept manages to serve the functions that it does.

5 A Compelling Picture

I want to suggest that, taken together, the considerations of Section 4 present a compelling picture: that the concept of knowledge serves to govern the flow of actionable information in an epistemic community. That is, the concept governs both information uptake and information distribution, at the service of individual action and the coordination

¹⁸ For an overview, see BENTON, Matthew, Knowledge Norms, in: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/kn-norms/#H2>>.

¹⁹ See CRAIG, Edward, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1999. This general methodological approach is explored in: HENDERSON, David, and GRECO, John (eds.), *Epistemic Evaluation: Purposeful Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

of group action²⁰. This broad point of view helps to explain the close connection between knowledge and action. (The purpose of knowledge is to serve action.) It also helps to explain the close connection between knowledge and assertion. (The purpose of assertion is to distribute knowledge.) Finally, such a picture speaks to the practical value of the concept of knowledge, our knowledge language, and knowledge itself.

Post-Gettier epistemology takes this broad point of view seriously, and tries to develop substantive theories about the nature and value of knowledge in the context of the methodological constraints that it imposes. In doing so, we find ourselves addressing issues in value theory, action theory, philosophy of language, ontology, social epistemology, sociology, and empirical psychology, all of which enrich both our questions and our investigations in the field of epistemology. Of course, not all epistemologists writing in our post-Gettier era would embrace the broad approach that I am calling compelling. Nevertheless, contemporary epistemology is now characterized, to a greater or lesser degree, by the methodological constraints that we have been discussing.

6 A Case Study: Does Knowledge Require Safety or Sensitivity?

I end with an example of how our new constraints help to adjudicate a standing dispute in epistemology. The issue concerns the widely accepted notion that knowledge is not “true by accident.” In some important sense, a true belief that counts as knowledge cannot be merely accidentally true. Modal epistemology tries to characterize this anti-luck condition on knowledge in an informative way. In recent years, the literature has focused on two main contenders: safety theories and sensitivity theories.

The spirit of a safety condition is that, in cases of knowledge, S would not easily go wrong by believing as she does. That is, in cases of knowledge, S in fact gets things right, and would not easily get things wrong²¹. The spirit of a sensitivity condition is that, in cases of knowledge, one would notice if things were different. That is, in cases of knowledge, S in fact notices how things are, and would notice if things were different. A common way of stating the safety and sensitivity conditions uses a possible worlds heuristic. Hence we have:

²⁰ For seminal work in this direction, cf. DRETSKE, Fred, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981, and GOLDMAN, Alvin, *Knowledge in a Social World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. I defend this broad point of view and develop it in: GRECO, John, *Testimonial Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, in: HENDERSON, David, and GRECO, John (eds.), *Epistemic Evaluation: Purposeful Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 274-290.

²¹ Compare WILLIAMSON, Timothy, *op. cit.*, p. 123-124.

Safety. S's belief that p is *safe* just in case: In close possible worlds where S believes that p, p is true.

Think of a space of possible worlds centered on the actual world and branching out according to some appropriate similarity ordering. S's belief that p is safe just in case: there are no close worlds where both S believes that p, and p is false. Put differently, we would have to go a long way off from the actual world to find a world where both S believes that p and p is false.

Sensitivity. S's belief that p is *sensitive* just in case: In the closest possible world where p is false, S does not believe that p.

Think of a space of possible worlds centered on the actual world and branching out according to some appropriate similarity ordering. S's belief that p is sensitive just in case: in the closest world where p is false, S does not believe that p. Put differently, the closest not-p world is also a world where S does not believe that p²².

A further distinction among safety conditions is between “weak” safety and “strong” safety²³. Thus,

Strong Safety. In *all* close worlds where S believes that p, p is true. Alternatively: In close worlds where S believes that p, never is p false.

Weak Safety. In *most* close worlds where S believes that p, p is true. Alternatively: In close worlds where S believes that p, almost never is p false.

The intuitive idea being captured here is that, within some space of worlds, S's belief might be more or less safe. In the best case, S's belief will be perfectly safe within the relevant space. Similar notions can be defined for relative strong and weak safety.

There are no natural analogues for the sensitivity condition. Recall: to evaluate whether that condition is satisfied, one goes out to the nearest

²² It is well known that neither condition is plausible when stated in its simplest form, as above. Rather, each condition must be complicated to avoid clear counter-examples. The most common complication is to make a distinction between “outright” or “non-relative” sensitivity (safety) and “relative” sensitivity (safety). For example, Nozick famously defended a version of the sensitivity condition that makes sensitivity relative to a method. See NOZICK, Robert, *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. Likewise, Sosa defended a version of the safety condition that makes safety relative to a basis, and I have argued that safety should be understood relative to an ability. See SOSA, Ernest, How Must Knowledge be Modally Related to What is Known, in: *Philosophical Topics*, 26:1/2 (1999), p. 373-384; and IDEM, How to Defeat Opposition to Moore, in: *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (1999), p. 141-155; and GRECO, John, Knowledge, Virtue and Safety, in: ÁNGEL FERNANDEZ, Miguel (ed.), *Performance Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 51-61.

²³ See GRECO, John, Knowledge as Credit for True Belief, in: DEPAUL, Michael and ZAGZEBSKI, Linda (eds.), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 111-134; and IDEM, Better Safe than Sensitive, in: BECKER, Kelly and BLACK, Tim (eds.), *The Sensitivity Principle in Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 193-206.

not-p world (or to the nearest not-p world where some further condition is satisfied, if one is evaluating a relative sensitivity condition), and then one looks to see if that is also an “S believes that p” world. If not, then the sensitivity condition is satisfied. But then a distinction between “all” worlds and “most” worlds does not come into it – either S believes at the nearest not-p world or she does not²⁴.

How are we to adjudicate between safety theories and sensitivity theories? One way to do that is to take seriously the close relations among knowledge, assertion and action, and in particular the idea that knowers ought to be good informants. Doing so, I want to argue, speaks strongly in favor of a safety condition over a sensitivity condition. The central idea is this: We want our informants to be reliable (or dependable) across close counterfactual situations – we want them to be keyed in to how things actually are, and to how things might easily be, in the contexts in which their information is needed. The other side of that coin is this: We shouldn’t care about whether our informants are sensitive to far-off counterfactual situations – it should not matter whether they are reliable or dependable in situations vastly different from the contexts in which their information is needed. Accordingly, the concept of a good informant requires a safety condition rather than a sensitivity condition.

Consider an example to illustrate the point²⁵. Suppose that I am standing on an African plain and you are high up in a tree. I need information about whether there are predators in the area, and I look to you as my informant. What condition must you satisfy to be a *good* informant? Presumably it is something like this: You are reliable on the question whether there are any predators out there! But what does *that* require? Presumably this: Not only that you have a true belief about whether there are predators nearby, but that you would not easily have a false belief about this. For example, suppose that you can see that there are none, but if one were to walk into the area, you would see that as well. In other words, your being a good informant requires that you satisfy a safety condition – that you would not easily believe that there are no predators and that belief be false.

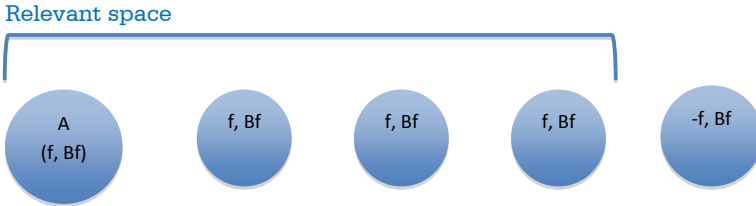
What is *not* required, however, is that you are sensitive to the relevant facts out to far-off worlds. Suppose, for example, that you are insensitive to whether you are being deceived about predators in the area by an evil demon, or by futuristic anthropologists who have the technology to so deceive you. That does not in the least affect your being a good informant for me here and now. Again, what matters is that you are reliable in the

²⁴ I am here ignoring the possibility of ties for the nearest not-p world.

²⁵ The example is from CRAIG, Edward, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

situation we are actually in. The logical space in this case is represented in Figure 1.

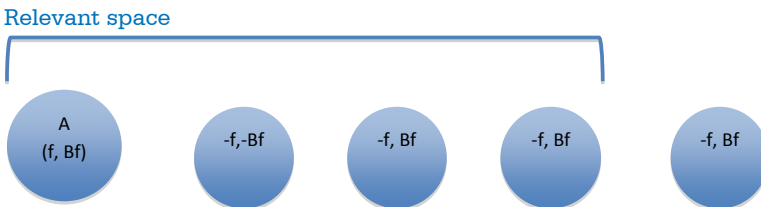
Figure 1. African Plain



S's belief in A (the actual world) is safe, not sensitive.

A second example shows that the sensitivity condition fails to accommodate the idea of being reliable *across* or *throughout* a space of close counterfactual situations, and therefore fails to capture a central feature of being a good informant. Suppose that there are ten assassins in the area, each of who is not in fact among us, but could easily be among us. Suppose also that the ten could not *equally* easily be among us. That is, one of the assassins (Mr. Near) could *very* easily be among us, but each of the others would have to do somewhat more to get himself into our midst. Suppose also that you are aware that Mr. Near is an assassin and could easily identify him were he among us. However, the other nine assassins are unknown to you. Now consider the proposition *There are no assassins among us*. Even if that proposition is true and you believe that it is true, there are many close worlds where there is an assassin among us but where you do not notice that there is. Which is to say that you are not a good informant on the matter. However, your belief that there are no assassins does satisfy the sensitivity condition. This is because the *closest* world in which there is an assassin among us is a world where Mr. Near is among us, and you *do* recognize him. The logical space in this case is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Assassins.



S's belief in A (the actual world) is sensitive, not safe.

In sum, the idea that knowers should be good informants is nicely captured by a safety condition on knowledge, but not by a sensitivity condition. And to this extent, a safety condition better explains the close relations we find among knowledge, assertion and action. In short, assertions and actions that are grounded in safe belief are just the sort that will serve action (our own and our interlocutors) well in the practical environments that we care about. These sorts of consideration may not be decisive, but they do give us some traction, beyond competing intuitions, relevant to adjudicating rival positions regarding the modal condition on knowledge^{26,27}.

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²⁶ I expand on the argument of this section in: GRECO, John, Better Safe than Sensitive, in: BECKER, Kelly and BLACK, Tim (eds.), op. cit., p. 193-206.

²⁷ Thanks to participants at two conferences where versions of this paper were presented: *Thinking about Knowledge. Epistemology 50 Years after Gettier's Paper*, held at Swarthmore College in April of 2013; and *The First International Conference on Analytic Epistemology*, held at Federal University of Santa Maria, Brazil in September of 2014. Thanks also to Peter Graham for comments on an earlier draft.

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