

A Puzzle About Infallibilism

Stephen Wright

University of Sheffield

A Test Case

Someone (infallibly) believes that X drank a bottle of poison and (infallibly) believes that anyone who drinks such poison will be dead within 24 hours. 24 hours later, the observer comes to believe that X is dead. Unbeknownst to the observer, X was actually run over by a bus before the poison took effect.

Reasoning

Suppose our observer reasons as follows:

(1) Anyone who drinks the poison would die within 24 hours.

(2) X drank the poison 24 hours ago.

Therefore

(3) The poison has killed X.

Therefore

(4) X is dead.

The Question

Does our observer know that X is dead?

If yes: then inferring through a false belief (consciously or unconsciously) doesn't prevent you from knowing.

If no: then forming an infallibly justified belief isn't sufficient for you to know.

False Beliefs

- ▶ Inferring through a false belief is usually sufficient to prevent you from knowing.
- ▶ It might even be sufficient if it's just hidden in the background...

What I'm Not Saying

- ▶ I'm not saying that all Gettier cases are like this (I'm pretty sure they aren't).
- ▶ But it's a fairly common view that inferring through a falsehood is *sufficient* to prevent your belief being knowledge, even if it's not necessary.

Infallible Justification

- ▶ If our observer doesn't know, then she can have an infallibly-justified belief that doesn't amount to knowledge.
- ▶ This is surprising:

Gettier Cases

- ▶ It's supposed to be a nice thing about infallibilism that it doesn't have to worry about Gettier cases.

'[a]ccording to the infallibilist, it is impossible to justifiedly believe something false. This has the tidy result that justification is sufficient to convert belief into knowledge'

(Sturgeon, 1993, p. 156).

See?

'one way to solve the Gettier problem is to give up the independence between the justification condition and the truth condition'

(Zagzebski, 1994, p. 72).

One More For Luck...

'the Gettier cases turn on the possibility of a person's having a justified, yet false, belief'

(Kaplan, 1985, p. 353).

Infallible Justification?

- ▶ Can the justification really be infallible given the false belief?
- ▶ I think so – the *believer* isn't infallible, but the grounds for her *belief* are.

Infallible Justification

- ▶ Leaving aside necessary truths, infallible justification is usually justification that guarantees the truth of the belief.
- ▶ And the observers grounds for (3) guarantee (4), even if they don't guarantee (3).

That's all...

... thanks for listening.