KNOWLEDGE, DEFEASIBILITY, AND THE GETTIER PROBLEM

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Summary
It is natural to assume that since knowledge requires doxastic justification (whatever the exact nature of this), then if doxastic justification is defeasible, as many would assume, then so is knowledge. In the paper I argue that knowledge is defeasible in a way that does not depend on the purported defeasibility of doxastic justification, but rather in a way that relates directly to the famous Gettier Problem. And, though less important in this context, even if doxastic justification is defeasible, this does strictly speaking not make knowledge defeasible.

1. Introduction

Knowledge is defeasible in a way that relates directly to the famous Gettier Problem, or so I argue in this paper. To many readers it might not seem terribly surprising that knowledge is defeasible, but perhaps this is because they have the defeasibility of doxastic justification in mind. Since knowledge requires doxastic justification (whatever the exact nature of this), then if doxastic justification is defeasible, as many would assume, then so is knowledge. What I suggest in this paper, however, is that knowledge is defeasible in a way that does not depend on the purported defeasibility of doxastic justification. Even if doxastic justification were not defeasible, then knowledge would nonetheless be defeasible for the reasons that I will lay out below. And perhaps more surprising, but less important in the present context, even if doxastic justification is defeasible, this does

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1. A precursor of this paper was presented at the conference Defeasibility in Epistemology, Ethics, Law and Logic, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, September 24–26, 2010. I would like to thank participants at that event for comments and inspiring discussion, especially (in alphabetical order): Claudia Blöser, Mikael Janvid, Hannes Ole Matthiessen, Hans Rott, R. Jay Wallace, Michael Williams, Marcus Willaschek.
strictly speaking not make knowledge defeasible, as I shall explain below. I hope that all of this is at least mildly surprising. Moreover, I will argue that there is an intimate connection between the sort of defeasibility that I have in mind and the Gettier Problem that has troubled modern epistemology since its inception by Edmund Gettier in 1963.2 The basic idea I want to propose and defend is quite simple: some event that would constitute a Gettier-style obstacle to a true and justified belief being an instance of knowledge is a defeater to that item of knowledge. And since such events are always possible, knowledge is defeasible. In this paper, I develop this view in some detail.3

2. Defeater-structure

Consider first what it is for something to be a defeater of something else. Here and in the ensuing discussion I will assume the following:

Defeater-structure. Some object O and properties P and Q have a defeater-structure just in case (i) O has property P in virtue of having property Q, (ii) unless there is a defeater. A defeater is any property R, such that Q and R are co-possible, and yet (Q & R) entails that O does not have P.

There are many well-rehearsed examples of phenomena that seem to have a defeater-structure (the object O can be many different types of entities, as the examples below illustrate). Legal duties may be a case in point. Suppose that some part of the legislation specifies that I have a legal duty to do so and so, or a legal right to this and that. Normally it is understood that circumstances may be such that my legal duties or rights don’t apply, all things considered. My duties or rights might be outweighed by other concerns, or circumstances might be such that the legal duties or rights simply cease to apply, though this is often not specified in the legal documents. So, in many cases, specific legal rights and duties seem to display a defeater-structure. Legal rights and duties apply to individuals in virtue of the proper legislation being enacted, and yet there are circumstances that void the rights and duties, despite the legislation still being in place.

2. In his (Gettier 1963).
3. The main discussion of the Gettier Problem draws some material from my longer and more detailed discussion ‘Knowledge, Truth by Luck, and What Solves the Gettier Problem’ (in preparation).