Know how to be Gettiered?

TED POSTON
University of South Alabama

Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson's influential article "Knowing How" argues that knowledge-how is a species of knowledge-that. One objection to their view is that knowledge-how is significantly different than knowledge-that because Gettier cases afflict the latter but not the former. Stanley and Williamson argue that this objection fails. Their response, however, is not adequate. Moreover, I sketch a plausible argument that knowledge-how is not susceptible to Gettier cases. This suggests a significant distinction between knowledge-that and knowledge-how.

In Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson's noteworthy article "Knowing How"[1] they argue that knowledge-how is a species of knowledge-that.[2] One objection to their view is that knowledge-how is significantly different than knowledge-that because Gettier cases afflict knowledge-that but not knowledge-how.[3] Stanley and Williamson argue that this Gettier objection fails. However, their response is not adequate. Moreover, I shall provide a general argument that Gettier cases do not arise for knowledge-how.

Stanley and Williamson's response to the Gettier objection is to describe a Gettier case for knowledge-how. Here is the case they offer:

> [T]here are indeed Gettier cases for knowledge-how. Bob wants to learn how to fly in a flight simulator. He is instructed by Henry. Unknown to Bob, Henry is a malicious imposter who has inserted a randomizing device in the simulator's controls and intends to give all kinds of incorrect advice. Fortunately, by sheer chance the randomizing device causes exactly the same results in the simulator as would have occurred without it, and by incompetence Henry gives exactly the same advice as a proper instructor would have done. Bob passes the course with flying colors. He has still not flown a real plane. Bob

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[1]   Stanley and Williamson (2001).

[2]   Ibid., 411.

[3]   Ibid., 435.

has a justified true belief about how to fly. But there is a good sense in which he does not *know* how to fly.[4]

As far as intuition goes this does not seem correct. There is a good sense in which Bob *does* know how to fly. Bob's attempts to fly would be no less successful than the attempts of others that underwent a regular flight course. If Bob took the controls of the plane he would perform adequately. Bob could successfully pass mandated tests to assess whether he obtained ample training. Bob's explanations of what to do in certain counterfactual circumstances would appear just as adequate as his peers trained at a normal facility. In short, Bob's intentions to fly and subsequent performances would be successful.

In addition to this intuitive judgment, I contend there is a general line of reasoning for thinking that there will not be Gettier cases for knowledge-how. The argument is straightforward. The first premise of the argument states that Gettier cases for know-how, if they exist, require that the subject intelligently and successfully φ, where φ ranges over actions. In general, Gettier cases for know-how, if they exist, would require that the intelligence condition and the success condition are satisfied. These conditions are analogous to the justified belief condition and the truth condition in Gettier cases of knowledge-that. In a Gettier case for know-that justified belief comes apart from the truth in a way that is incompatible with knowledge-that. So also, in a purported Gettier case for knowledge-how the intelligence base the subject uses doesn't connect to success in the right way to yield knowledge-how. In Stanley and Williamson's example Bob's intelligence base enables him to successfully fly a plane, though they claim this is not know-how because the intelligence base is faulty in some way. The most plausible candidate for a fault in the intelligence base is that the base—the set of instructions Bob acquires on the basis of his training—is not known. Bob doesn't know that these instructions will enable him to fly. The second premise of the argument is that one knows how to φ, if one can intelligently and successfully φ. If, for instance, Sally intelligently moves this way and that way with the goal of riding a bike and she succeeds then Sally knows how to ride a bike. So given the first premise, the sufficient condition for knowing how laid down in the second premise is satisfied. Therefore any alleged Gettier case for knowing how will turn out *not* to be a Gettier case, for it will be a genuine case of knowing how.[5]

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4   Stanley and Williamson, 435.

5   I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for improvements to this paragraph.

The argument comes down to the plausibility of the second premise. I think it is plausible. It explains why we attribute know-how to successful displays of skill. When an individual skillfully wins several games of tournament quality chess it is safe to conclude to the individual knows how to play chess. This judgment is not sensitive to learning that, for instance, the individual gained the skill by luck. If the individual learned by a mischievous grandmaster or a poorly designed computer program then regardless of the high probability of failure given the actual training method the individual learned something and it is hard to see what the individual learned if not how to play chess.

On the account Stanley and Williamson provide the alleged implausibility of the second premise must lie in its neglect of a Gettier condition on know-how. It's not difficult to see that the supposed deficiency would be that the intelligence base must be known. In Stanley and Williamson's example Bob acts intelligently on the basis of the set of instructions he acquires, that is, the intelligence base. So, whereas the second premise of my argument states that intelligent, successful action is a sufficient condition for know-how, Stanley and Williamson should hold that it's not because the intelligence base must also be known.

However, intuition suggests that propositional knowledge of the intelligence base isn't a necessary condition for know-how. Intuition yields this verdict with Stanley and Williamson's own purported case. Here are two other cases.

Nolan's Curve

> Nolan wants to be a good pitcher and needs to learn how to throw a fastball, breaking ball, slider, and curve. He has good reason to believe that Mike is a great pitching coach. Mike doesn't know much about baseball and even less about how to pitch. Nevertheless, Mike tells Nolan that to throw a fastball he should V, to throw a breaking ball he should X, to throw a slider do Y, and for a curve do Z. Mike's wrong about everything except a curve. Nolan internalizes the instructions so that he can competently carry them out.

In this case it seems right to say that even though Nolan can't throw a fastball, slider, or breaking ball, he can throw a curve. Moreover, even though Nolan does not know that Z is the way to throw a curve, he knows how to throw a curve. If the catcher calls for a curve ball then Nolan will competently deliver a curve ball.

Olavi's Finnish Tango

> Olavi wants to learn the Finnish tango, an established varia-
> tion on the Argentine tango. He finds a website that aims to
> specialize in the Finnish tango. Olavi downloads the instruc-
> tions and learns those instructions. Olavi, though, is very lucky
> to have what are in fact the correct instructions. The website is
> devoted to causing mass confusion about the Finnish tango by
> uploading different instructions each second.

The results: Olavi doesn't know that the instructions are correct,
though he has a justified true belief that the instructions are correct.
Moreover, Olavi knows how to dance the Finnish tango.

In each case the method used to acquire the information is not
reliable. In nearby possible worlds Nolan can't throw a curve and
Olavi can't perform the Finnish tango. But why should this affect
know-how? Propositional knowledge is constrained by anti-luck intu-
itions. If one's belief is true just by luck then that is incompatible
with propositional knowledge.[6] But knowledge-how doesn't seem to
be constrained by the *same* anti-luck intuitions. To be sure, if I win
the lottery I don't know how to win the lottery. But my success in
winning the lottery doesn't have the same teleological explanation as
in the case of Nolan's curve, Olavi's Finnish tango, or Bob's suc-
cessful attempts to fly. For example, in Nolan's case he intends on
what is the right intelligence base to throw a curve and he succeeds.
His success isn't an accident given that intelligence base. So although
he is very lucky to have that intelligence base and that luck
undermines his propositional knowledge, it doesn't undermine his
know-how. Knowledge-how isn't constrained by the same anti-luck
intuitions as propositional knowledge.

Conclusion

What we need from Stanley and Williamson is a reason for thinking
that propositional knowledge of the intelligence base is a necessary
condition for know-how. I've argued that this requirement conflicts
with intuition about cases. Until we have a reason for thinking this,
the argument I've sketched plausibly suggests that there are not Gettier
cases for knowledge-how.[7]

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[6]   For a sophisticated development of anti-luck intuitions see Pritchard (2005).

[7]   Thanks to EJ Coffman, Matthew McGrath, and an anonymous reviewer for excel-
lent comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

References

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