

MORAL WORTH IN GETTIER CASES

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FOR ACTIONS to have moral worth, must they be motivated by moral knowledge? Paulina Sliwa and J.J. Cunningham say yes.¹ Sliwa writes, “A morally right action has moral worth if and only if it is motivated by concern for doing what’s right (conative requirement) and by knowledge that it is the right thing to do (knowledge requirement).”² Cunningham’s Know How View requires morally worthy actions to be motivated by “one’s knowing how to respond to reasons” that make the action right, “triggered by the agent’s propositional knowledge of the particular normative reason at issue.”³ Both views require actions with moral worth to be motivated by moral knowledge rather than by more easily achieved epistemic states like justified true moral belief.

Gettier cases involve justified true belief that is not knowledge.⁴ They suggest that moral knowledge is not needed for moral worth, as justified true moral belief serves equally well. The following Gettier case is a counterexample to the knowledge requirement:

Texting the Rabbi: Ava faces a moral quandary. William loaned her a weapon. Now he is furiously pounding on her door and demanding it back. Unsure about what to do, Ava texts her rabbi, whom she knows to be an excellent source of advice on moral questions: “William is furiously pounding on my door and demanding his weapon. He might hurt someone, but it is his property. So would returning it be right?” The rabbi understands the situation and replies, “No.” Seeing his reply, Ava forms the true belief that it is right not to return the weapon, as reasons to prevent harm are decisive.⁵ She rightly does not return the weapon.

1 Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge”; and Cunningham, “Moral Worth and Knowing How to Respond to Reasons.” See also Sliwa, “Praise Without Perfection”; and Sliwa, “Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong.”

2 Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” 394.

3 Cunningham, “Moral Worth and Knowing How to Respond to Reasons,” 396.

4 Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

5 Plato, *The Republic*.

Beth then faces the same quandary. William loaned her his other weapon. He furiously pounds on her door next, demanding it back. Beth proceeds just as Ava did, considering both options and texting the rabbi the same words. But the rabbi never sees her message, as a thief steals his phone right after he replies to Ava. Seeing Beth's message, the thief mischievously decides to answer. He flips a coin, and it comes up tails, so he replies, "No." Thinking the rabbi sent the message, Beth forms the true belief that it is right not to return the weapon, as reasons to prevent harm are decisive. She rightly does not return the weapon.

In Texting the Rabbi, Ava's and Beth's actions of refusing to return William's weapon both seem to have equal moral worth.⁶ They face the same situations, which they deal with by seeking advice and acting on it in the same ways. The difference is that the wise rabbi's testimony causes Ava's belief, while the mischievous thief's randomly chosen answer causes Beth's belief, making them differ in knowledge. Yet Ava and Beth have equal reason to believe that their messages are from the rabbi and equal reason to believe what the messages say. What makes them differ in knowledge is too far beyond them to make them differ in moral worth.

Beth's justified true belief that it is right to not return the weapon falls short of knowledge, making Texting the Rabbi a Gettier case. Her belief has features common to Gettier cases. It violates safety conditions on knowledge, as she would acquire a false belief in nearby worlds where the thief's coin comes up heads.⁷ A false lemma causes it, namely that the rabbi sent the message, when the thief actually sent it.⁸ Many other things that Gettierize us, like Russell's stopped clock and Dharmottara's mirage, generate unsafe beliefs via false lemmas.⁹ With Russell's stopped clock, the false lemma that the clock is running causes true belief about the time, which is unsafe because viewing the clock at

- 6 If this moral quandary seems so easy that Ava and Beth seem morally incompetent for asking for advice about it, you can imagine William as more judicious or more hotheaded until the dilemma becomes nontrivial. Hills raises the case of Ron the extremist, who asks his rabbi for advice about whether to murder ("Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology"); and Sliwa responds by treating Ron as morally incompetent ("Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge"). This need not apply to Ava and Beth.
- 7 Sosa, "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore"; and Pritchard, "Anti-luck Virtue Epistemology." Becker connects safety formulations and reliabilism. See Becker, "Reliabilism and Safety."
- 8 Clark and Armstrong discuss false lemmas: Clark, "Knowledge and Grounds"; and Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*.
- 9 Russell, *Human Knowledge*. As Nagel notes, the Indian philosopher Dharmottara developed Gettier cases around the year 770. See Nagel, *Knowledge*.

other times would generate false belief. With Dharmottara's mirage, the false lemma that one veridically perceives water causes true belief that there is water, which is unsafe because it would have been false without the unseen water nearby under a rock. While precisely stating how justified true belief differs from knowledge is notoriously difficult, false lemmas and violations of safety are common enough to Gettier cases to be suggested as accounts of the difference.¹⁰ Their presence in Beth's case confirms the intuitive sense that she has justified true belief without knowledge.

Ava and Beth differ in whether they know that their actions are right, which Sliwa's formulation is concerned with. Ava receives genuine moral testimony from someone wise and gains moral knowledge from it. Beth unwittingly receives a random answer from a mischief maker, which is not a way of gaining knowledge about morality or most other topics. Because Ava knows that her action is right and Beth does not, Sliwa's account entails that Ava's not returning the weapon has more moral worth than Beth's. This makes Texting the Rabbi a counterexample to Sliwa's version of the knowledge requirement.

Ava and Beth also differ in whether they have propositional knowledge of how to respond to the reasons before them, which Cunningham's formulation is concerned with. Upon seeing the rabbi's reply and coming to know that it is right not to return the weapon, Ava gains the propositional knowledge that the reasons to prevent harm to others make it right not to return William's weapon, even though it is his property.¹¹ The right-making reason she is aware of, decisive in this case, is her reason to prevent harm to others. This triggers her knowledge of how to respond to these reasons—namely by not returning William's weapon even though it is his property. Upon seeing the thief's reply, Beth does not gain propositional knowledge about how to respond to the reasons before her. She merely has justified true belief that it is right to respond by not returning the weapon—not knowledge. So Cunningham's account entails that Ava's action has more moral worth than Beth's. That their actions have the same moral worth despite Ava's additional knowledge of normative reasons makes Texting the Rabbi a counterexample to Cunningham's version of the knowledge requirement.

10 For a difficult Gettier case for safety conditions, see Williams and Sinhababu, "The Backward Clock, Truth-Tracking, and Safety."

11 Cunningham's account needs to assign importance to something like knowing how to respond to all the reasons in combination or knowing which are decisive or stronger. One should not satisfy the knowledge requirement if one knows one has reason to save a dollar and reason not to kill, and believes that the reason to save a dollar is decisive or stronger. Even if laziness akratically prevents one from killing by combining with the weaker motivation not to kill, this refraining from killing is deficient in moral worth.

As Beth does some actions that the knowledge requirement correctly credits with moral worth, it is important to clarify which action the knowledge requirement gets wrong. Sliwa notes, "Since most actions are complex, agents who perform some morally wrong action may, at the same time, perform actions that are morally right. When these actions are motivated in the right way, the agent is morally praiseworthy for them."¹² As Sliwa's example of a donor to counterproductive charities suggests, Beth does some actions motivated by moral knowledge, to which the knowledge account ascribes moral worth. Beth knows that she should seek and follow advice from the rabbi to address her uncertainty, and the knowledge requirement correctly credits her for these actions. The same is true of Ava, whose equivalent actions have the same moral worth. The knowledge requirement faces problems specifically with Beth's action of not returning the weapon. Since she is Gettierized, the knowledge requirement treats this action of not returning the weapon as having less moral worth than Ava's not returning the weapon, when both actions intuitively seem to have equal moral worth.

Might Ava's and Beth's reliance on moral testimony in this case deprive both their actions of moral worth, rendering them equal? Alison Hills argues that mere moral testimony does not generate the kind of knowledge required for moral worth, perhaps because something else like understanding is required.¹³ Many others argue that moral testimony fails to generate the full epistemic benefits of other testimony.¹⁴

Sliwa and Cunningham understand that knowledge accounts are poorly positioned to treat moral testimony as unusual in this way. Both accordingly treat action driven by knowledge of rightness as both necessary and sufficient for moral worth. Excepting testimonial knowledge would abandon sufficiency. Moreover, treating moral knowledge as having an atypical relation to testimony would concede advantages to rival accounts invoking alternatives to knowledge that more typically have that relation. Rather than pursuing this dubious strategy, Sliwa is faithful to the spirit of the knowledge account, accepting that "moral testimony can be a source of moral knowledge."¹⁵ Breaking any links between moral testimony, moral knowledge, and moral worth would also push the knowledge requirement out of alignment with Timothy Williamson's

12 Sliwa, "Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge," 403.

13 Hills, *The Beloved Self*.

14 See McGrath, "The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference"; and Fletcher, "Moral Testimony."

15 Sliwa, "Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge," 394.

knowledge-first research program.¹⁶ It treats knowledge as necessary and sufficient for evidence and the justification of assertion, and does not generally make exceptions for testimonial knowledge.

Sliwa instead argues that the knowledge requirement prevents accidental performance of right action from conferring moral worth. She writes that requiring less than knowledge and settling for mere “justification and truth is to give up on the thought that morally praiseworthy actions are non-accidentally right.”¹⁷ This view treats Ava’s knowledge as making it “not just an accident that she did the right thing.”¹⁸

Gettier cases like Texting the Rabbi provide precision regarding the exact sense of “not just an accident” relevant to moral worth.¹⁹ There is an obvious sense in which Beth’s doing the right action is accidental. If the coin had come up heads, Beth would have received a different text message and acted wrongly. But Ava’s right action is not far from being similarly accidental. If the thief had stolen the rabbi’s phone a little earlier and randomly sent a “yes” message to Ava, she too would have acted wrongly. Right action performed on the basis of testimony can approach accidentality, as advisors might make rare and unpredictable mistakes or be impersonated by impostors. But the absence of mistakes and impostors should not be regarded as an accident that undermines moral knowledge and worth. That would prevent actions motivated by moral testimony from having moral worth and perhaps generalize into a broader skepticism that prevents other fallible sources of evidence from conferring moral knowledge and worth. The knowledge requirement is supposed to identify the counterfactuals under which right action is nonaccidental and can have moral worth. Sliwa writes, “The counterfactuals that matter are simply those that come from our best account of knowledge.”²⁰

Texting the Rabbi shows that the counterfactuals that matter for knowledge are not the ones that matter for moral worth. One way to put this is that knowledge attributions are sensitive to some differences of modal distance that do not affect moral worth attributions. Beth’s belief is not knowledge because false belief is just a coin flip away, while Ava’s belief is knowledge because false belief

16 Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, cited by Sliwa, “Moral Understanding as Knowing Right from Wrong.” For discussion, see McGlynn, *Knowledge First?*; and Littlejohn, “How and Why Knowledge Is First.”

17 Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” 402.

18 Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” 406.

19 See Isserow, “Moral Worth and Doing the Right Thing by Accident”; Johnson King, “Accidentally Doing the Right Thing”; and Coates, “Moral Worth and Accidentally Right Actions.”

20 Sliwa, “Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge,” 401.

is an earlier theft and a coin flip away. The additional modal distance provided by the timing of the theft gives Ava moral knowledge that Beth lacks. But this additional modal distance does not give Ava's action moral worth that Beth's action lacks. So moral worth does not require moral knowledge—making the knowledge requirement false.

The difference in what moral knowledge and moral worth require can be fruitfully expressed in explanationist terms as well.²¹ Ava's belief is knowledge because well-considered testimony from a morally knowledgeable person explains it. It is not accidental that the rabbi knew what to do and gave Ava the right answer. Beth's belief is not knowledge because the random outcome of a coin flip explains it. It is accidental that the thief's coin came up tails, and he gave Beth the right answer. But what explains whether our actions have moral worth is too deeply inside us to be affected by the external accidents undermining knowledge in Gettier cases.²² Morally worthy action indeed must not be merely accidental. But actions motivated by Gettierized justified true belief rather than by knowledge can be nonaccidental in the sense required for moral worth.

Moral worth cannot be Gettierized. Knowledge can, as its necessary conditions extend far outside us. A mischievous thief can deprive us of knowledge, while leaving all our experiences, beliefs, and actions exactly the same. Moral worth is not so easily stolen away.²³

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21 For views invoking explanatory notions rather than modality, see Faraci, "Groundwork for an Explanationist Account of Epistemic Coincidence"; and Singh, "Moral Worth, Credit, and Non-accidentality."

22 Arpaly and Markovits suggest the agent's quality of will. See Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*; and Markovits, "Acting for the Right Reasons."

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