

# WHAT BOOZE CAN DO TO PHILOSOPHY

## Once Upon a Time

I will start my story by sharing with you an episode of culture shock I experienced as a young man in Mexico, which only years later, I discovered to be an example of an important issue in philosophy known as the Gettier problem, named after the person (Edmund Gettier) who formulated it in 1963. Philosophical issues are often seen as being remote from everyday life but I find it fascinating that epistemology helped me to assimilate a personal experience I endured during what should have been a highly enjoyable Sunday drive, but which turned out to be something rather disturbing but also quite amusing.

## On The Road To Zacango

I emigrated to Mexico in 1975 after having met my fiancée (now my wife of forty-seven years) in Cambridge, England. I arrived in Mexico after our having been separated for some time, and so was delighted to be with her in her hometown of Toluca, the capital of the State of Mexico, which is just over an hour's drive from Mexico City. On my first Sunday in Mexico, she invited me to visit her family's ex-hacienda or ranch (Zacango), with one of my future sisters-in-law going along for the ride too.

Zacango is impressive, lying on the skirts of the massive volcano, 'El Nevado de Toluca', which dominates the city. With the amazingly blue sunlit Mexican sky above, and the Valley of Mexico stretching out before us, life seemed beautiful. In those days the ranch was not easily accessible: the route (I say route because there was no road as such then) lay along dirt tracks through fields of maize, across a dry river bed, via the village of San Felipe. We left Toluca with my future wife driving and arrived at San Felipe around noon. We entered this delightful village through a side street and turned right onto the main street; at which point I became petrified. What I saw was horrific; the street was strewn with dead bodies, all male, in grotesque positions lying both on the pavement and the street itself. I turned to my future wife for an explanation, but she appeared to be unconcerned, and just began to weave the car in between and around the corpses on the street. My fiancée's sister also was absolutely unperturbed.

Fantastical explanations for this macabre scene raced through my mind. Had there been an appalling massacre, a biblical plague, or a neutron bomb attack on the village which had annihilated the population but left the buildings standing? In a highly

agitated state eventually, I managed to blurt out the question/exclamation, “What on earth happened here?!” However, the only reply I received from my fiancée was “It’s Sunday!” I was incredibly impressed by her composure but obviously, her cryptic answer did nothing to calm me, and in fact, only heightened my terror and confusion. What happens on the Sabbath in San Felipe that could produce such mayhem?

Not being from the State of Mexico, there was no way I could have known that in San Felipe in those days the male inhabitants of the village began to imbibe an amazingly potent but very cheap alcoholic drink called ‘pulque’ (fermented agave sap) early on their day of rest. By midday each Sunday most of them were dead drunk, lying where they had fallen and remaining there until they had slept off their overindulgence, when the luckier individuals were able to beat a rather uncertain path home.

## **The Gettier Counter-problem**

What is the Gettier problem? Armstrong (1973, p. 308) explains it as follows:

Gettier produces counterexamples to the thesis that justified true belief is knowledge by producing true beliefs based on justifiably believed grounds... but where these grounds are in fact false.

It is perhaps difficult for us now to appreciate what effect this questioning of justifiable true belief had on the world of philosophy, and also I suppose that by now you are asking yourself what all of this has to do with you and real life. Well, what we know and how we come to know it are extremely important topics, as fake news, conspiracy theories, big lies, and current issues with social media testify.

Pollock (1996, p. 309) provides us with a description of the impact of Edmund Gettier’s counter-problems on the traditional epistemological analysis of knowledge as justified true belief:

In the period immediately preceding the publication of Gettier’s (1963) landmark article ‘Is justified true belief knowledge?’ this analysis was affirmed by virtually every writer in epistemology. Then Gettier published his article and single-handedly changed the course of epistemology.

But exactly what are we talking about here? Gettier (1963, p. 1) laid out the conditions “for someone’s knowing a given proposition”:

- (a) Someone (S) knows a proposition (P)
  - IFF (If and only if)
  - (i) P is true.
  - (ii) S believes that P, and
  - (iii) S is justified in believing that P. 1

He then proceeded to upend epistemology by making two succinct assertions:

1. First, in that sense of 'justified' in which S's being justified in believing P is a necessary condition of S's knowing that P, it is possible for a person to be justified in believing a proposition which is false.
2. Secondly, for any proposition P, if S is justified in believing P and P entails a conclusion (Q) and S deduces Q from P and accepts Q as a result of this deduction, then S is justified in believing Q.

## San Felipe

Given Gettier's article, how does my experience in San Felipe described earlier relate to the Gettier problem? Let's see how my case fits in with the traditional conditions for knowledge:

I knew that a terrible misfortune had befallen San Felipe (S knows that P)

- (i) (By the lights of Anglo-Saxon culture) A terrible misfortune had befallen San Felipe (P is true).
- (ii) I believed that this was so (S believes that P), and
- (iii) I was justified in believing that something terrible had happened in the village because I witnessed its consequences with my own eyes (S is justified in believing that P. 1)

Although all of the three traditional conditions for establishing the existence of knowledge were met in San Felipe, no knowledge can exist in this case because the justification for it is erroneous. What had happened in San Felipe was a normal and culturally innocuous occurrence in rural Mexico in the mid-1970s. However, when I witnessed its effects I was totally unaware of this.

## In Conclusion

The San Felipe case illustrates one of the most important aspects of my understanding of knowledge, namely that it is socially (and by implication culturally) sensitive. Pollock (1996, p. 317) explains this view as follows:

We are 'socially expected' to be aware of various things. We are expected to know what is announced on television, and we are expected to know what is in our mail. If we fail to know all these things and that makes a difference to whether we are justified in believing some true proposition P, then our objectively justified belief in P does not constitute knowledge.

However, Pollock (1996, p. 317) went on to create an epistemological proposition, which manages to avoid the Gettier Problem by recognizing the social (and cultural) aspects of the construction of knowledge:

My suggestion is that we can capture the social aspect of knowledge by requiring a knower to hold his belief on the basis of an argument ultimately undefeated relative not just to the set of all truths, but also to the set of all socially sensitive truths. My proposal is: S knows P if and only if S instantiates some argument A supporting P which is (1) ultimately undefeated relative to the set of all truths, and (2) ultimately undefeated relative to the set of all truths socially sensitive for S. This proposal avoids both the Gettier problem and the social problems discussed by Harman.

In San Felipe my belief did not justify any knowledge of what happened because (1) ultimately it is not undefeated relative to the set of all truths, and neither is it (2) ultimately undefeated relative to the set of all truths socially sensitive for S, which in this particular case were cultural.

I would like to end by returning to the idea of the philosophical affecting the mundane, especially, as life today might be considerably better for the odd injection of philosophical reflection, with or without alcohol being involved. I could probably hold forth on this topic for at least another paragraph or two. However, remembering that the title of the piece is 'What Booze can do to Philosophy', and not the other way around, perhaps we should just leave it there.

## **Bibliography**

- Armstrong D. M. (1973). *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press).
- (1974). 'An alleged defect in Gettier counter-examples. In *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 52(1).
- Gettier, E. (1963). 'Is justified true belief knowledge?'. In *Analysis*, 23(6).
- Pollock, J. 'The Gettier problem'. In P. Moser (ed.), *Empirical Knowledge* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).