THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

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0. Why care about knowledge?

One of the questions that is very rarely asked in epistemology concerns what is perhaps the most central issue for this area of philosophy. It is this: Why we should care about whether or not we have knowledge? Put another way: Is knowledge valuable and, if so, why? The importance of this question resides in the fact that it could well be that it is only if the primary focus of epistemological theorising—i.e., knowledge—is valuable that the epistemological enterprise is itself a worthwhile undertaking. The goal of this paper is to examine this issue in more detail. We will discover, perhaps surprisingly, that the value of knowledge is far from obvious.

1. The instrumental value of true belief

One way of approaching the topic of the value of knowledge is to note that one can only know what is true, and truth in one's beliefs does seem to be valuable. If truth in one's beliefs is valuable, and knowledge demands truth, then we may be at least halfway towards answering our question of why knowledge is valuable.

Truth in one's beliefs is at least minimally valuable in the sense that, all other things being equal at any rate, true beliefs are better than false ones because having true beliefs enables us to fulfil our goals. This sort of value — a value which accrues to something in virtue of some further valuable purpose that it serves — is known as instrumental value. Think, for example, of the value of a thermometer. Its value consists in the fact that it enables us to find out something of importance to us—i.e., what the temperature is.

In order to see the instrumental value of true belief, think about any subject matter that is of consequence to you, such as the time of your

crucial job interview. It is clearly preferable to have a true belief in this respect rather than a false belief, since without a true belief you'll have difficulty making this important meeting. That is, your goal of making this meeting is best served by having a true belief about when it takes place rather than a false one.

The problem, however, lies with the 'all other things being equal' clause which we put on the instrumental value of true belief. We have to impose this qualification because sometimes having a true belief could be unhelpful and actually impede one's goals, and in such cases true belief would lack instrumental value. For example, could one really summon the courage to jump a ravine and thereby get to safety if one knew (or at least truly believed) that there was a serious possibility that one would fail to reach the other side? Here, it seems, a false belief in one's abilities would be better than a true belief if the goal in question (jumping the ravine in order to save one's life) is to be achieved. So while true belief might generally be instrumentally valuable, it isn't always instrumentally valuable.

Moreover, some true beliefs are beliefs in trivial matters and in this case it isn't at all clear why we should value such beliefs at all. Imagine someone who, for no good reason, concerns herself with measuring each grain of sand on a beach, or someone who, even while being unable to operate a telephone, concerns herself with remembering every entry in a foreign phonebook. In each case, such a person would thereby gain lots of true beliefs but, crucially, one would regard such truth-gaining activity as rather pointless. After all, these true beliefs do not obviously serve any valuable purpose, and so do not seem to have any instrumental value (or, at the very least, what instrumental value these beliefs have is vanishingly small). It would, perhaps, be better—and thus of more value—to have fewer true beliefs, and possibly more false ones, if this meant that the true beliefs that one had were regarding matters of real consequence.

At most, then, we only seem able to marshal the conclusion that some true beliefs have instrumental value, not all of them. As a result, if we are to show that knowledge is valuable then we need to do more than merely note that knowledge entails truth and that true belief is instrumentally

valuable. Nevertheless, this conclusion need not be that dispiriting once we remember that while knowledge requires truth, not every instance of a true belief is an instance of knowledge. Accordingly, it could just be that those true beliefs that are clearly of instrumental value are the ones that are also instances of knowledge.

The problem with this line of thought ought to be obvious, since didn't our 'sand-measuring' agent know what the measurements of the sand were? Moreover, didn't our agent who was unable to jump the ravine because she was paralysed by fear fail to meet her goals because of what she knew? The problems that afflict the claim that all true beliefs are instrumentally valuable therefore similarly undermine the idea that all knowledge is instrumentally valuable. There is thus no easy way of defending the thesis that all knowledge must be valuable.

There is also a second problem lurking in the background here, which is that even if this project of understanding the value of knowledge in terms of the value of true belief were to be successful, it would still be problematic because it would entail that knowledge is no more valuable than mere true belief. But if that's right, then why do we value knowledge more than mere true belief?

2. The value of knowledge

So we cannot straightforwardly argue from the instrumental value of true belief that all knowledge must therefore be instrumentally valuable. That said, we can perhaps say something about the specific value of knowledge that is a little less ambitious and which simply accounts for why, in general and all other things being equal, we desire to be knowers as opposed to being agents who have mostly true beliefs but lack knowledge (or, worse, have mostly false beliefs). After all, if we want to achieve our goals in life then it would be preferable if we had knowledge which was relevant to these goals since knowledge is very useful in this respect. The idea is thus that while not all knowledge is instrumentally valuable, in general it is instrumentally valuable and, what is more, it is of greater instrumental value, typically at least, than mere true belief alone (thus explaining our intuition that knowledge is of more value than mere true belief).

Consider the following case. Suppose I want to find my way to the nearest restaurant in an unfamiliar city. Having mostly false beliefs about the locale will almost certainly lead to this goal being frustrated. If I think, for example, that all the restaurants are in the east of the city, when in fact they are in the west, then I'm going to spend a rather dispiriting evening trudging around this town without success.

True beliefs are better than false beliefs (i.e., are of more instrumental value), but are not as good as knowledge. Imagine, for instance, that you found out where the nearest restaurant was by reading a map of the town which is, unbeknownst to you, entirely fake and designed to mislead those unfamiliar with the area. Suppose further, however, that, as it happens, this map inadvertently shows you the right route to the nearest restaurant. You therefore have a true belief about where the nearest restaurant is, but you clearly lack knowledge of this fact. After all, your belief is only luckily true and that means it isn't knowledge.

Now one might think that it is neither here nor there to the value of your true belief whether it is also an instance of knowledge. So long as I find the nearest restaurant, what does it matter that I don't know where it is but merely have a true belief about where it is? The problem with mere true belief, however, is that, unlike knowledge, it is very unstable. Suppose, for example, that as you were walking to this restaurant you noticed that none of the landmarks corresponded to where they ought to be on the fake map in front you. You pass the town hall, for instance, and yet according to the map this building is on the other side of town. You'd quickly realise that the map you're using is unreliable, and in all likelihood you'd abandon your belief about where the nearest restaurant was, thereby preventing you from getting there.

In contrast, imagine that you form your belief about where the nearest restaurant is by looking at a reliable map, and thereby know where the nearest restaurant is. Since this is genuine knowledge, it would not be undermined in the way that the mere true belief was undermined, and thus you'd retain your true belief. This would mean that you would make it to the restaurant after all, and thereby achieve your goal. Having knowledge can thus be of greater instrumental value than mere true belief since having knowledge rather than mere true belief can make it

more likely that one achieves one's goals.

3. The statues of Daedalus

The previous point picks up on a famous claim made regarding knowledge by Plato. In his book, The Meno (see §§96d-100b), Plato compares knowledge to the statues of the ancient Greek sculptor Daedalus which, it is said, were so realistic that if one did not tether them to the ground they would run away. Plato's point is that mere true belief is like one of the untethered statues of Daedalus, in that one could very easily lose it. Knowledge, in contrast, is akin to a tethered statue, one that is therefore not easily lost.

The analogy to our previous discussion should be obvious. Mere true belief, like one of Daedalus's untethered statues, is more likely to be lost (i.e., run away) than knowledge, which is far more stable. Put another way, the true belief one holds when one has knowledge is far more likely to remain fast in response to changes in circumstances (e.g., new information that comes to light) than mere true belief, as we saw in the case just described of the person who finds out where the nearest restaurant is by looking at a reliable map, as opposed to one who finds out where it is by looking at a fake map.

Of course, knowledge isn't completely stable either, since one could always acquire a false, but plausible, piece of information that seems to call one's previous true information into question, but this is less likely to happen when it comes to knowledge than when it comes to true belief. In the example given earlier, suppose that the map is indeed reliable, and thus that you do know where the nearest restaurant is. Nevertheless, there might still be further misleading counterevidence that you could come across which would undermine this knowledge, such as the testimony of a friend you bump into who tells you (out of mischief) that the map is a fake. In the light of this new information, you'll probably change your belief and so fail to get to the restaurant after all.

Even so, however, the fact remains that knowledge is more stable than mere true belief. In the case just described, for example, the fact that the map had been working so far would give you good grounds to continue

trusting it, and so you might naturally be suspicious of any testimony you receive to the contrary. Suppose a perfect stranger told you that the map was a compete fake. Would that lead you to change your belief given that it has been reliable so far? Probably not. A friend's testimony carries more weight than a stranger's, but even this testimony might be ignored if you had reason to think your friend might be playing a trick on you.

If you merely had a true belief about where the nearest restaurant was, in contrast, and had no good reason in support of that true belief, then all kinds of conflicting information would undermine that belief. As we saw above, as soon as you start walking on your journey and you notice that none of the landmarks correspond to their locations on the map, then you would be liable to tear the map up in despair, even though the map is in the one respect that is important to you (how to get to the nearest restaurant) entirely reliable.

There is a good reason why knowledge is more stable than mere true belief, and this is because knowledge, unlike mere true belief, could not easily be mistaken. Imagine, for instance, a doctor who diagnoses a patient by (secretly) tossing a coin, thus leading the patient to form a particular belief about what is wrong with her. Suppose further that this diagnosis is, as it happens, correct. Clearly the doctor does not know what is wrong with the patient, even though she happened to get it right on this occasion, and neither does the patient know what is wrong with her given that she acquired her belief by listening to the doctor. The problem here is that it was just a matter of luck that the doctor chanced upon the right answer, and thus it is also a matter of luck that the patient formed a true belief about what was wrong with her. In both cases they could so easily have been wrong.

Compare this scenario, however, with that in which a doctor forms her diagnosis of the patient's illness in a diligent fashion by using the appropriate medical procedures. This doctor will (in most cases at least) end up with the same correct diagnosis as our irresponsible doctor, and thus the patient will again acquire a true belief about the nature of her condition. This time, though, the doctor and the patient will know what the correct diagnosis is. Moreover, there is no worry in this case

that this verdict could so easily have been mistaken—given that the doctor followed the correct procedures, it is in fact very unlikely that this diagnosis is wrong. Here we clearly have a case in which our goal of correctly determining the source of someone's illness is better served by the possession of knowledge rather than the possession of mere true belief because of the instability of mere true belief relative to knowledge (i.e., the fact that mere true belief, unlike knowledge, could so easily be wrong). In this sense, then, knowledge is more valuable to us than true belief alone.

For the most part, then, if one wishes to achieve one's goals it is essential that one has, at the bare minimum, true beliefs about the subject matter concerned. True belief is thus usually of instrumental value, even if it is not always of instrumental value. Ideally, however, it is better to have knowledge, since mere true belief has an instability that is not always conducive to success in one's projects. Since knowledge entails true belief, we can therefore draw two conclusions. First, that most knowledge, like most mere true belief, is of instrumental value. Second, and crucially, that knowledge is of greater instrumental value that mere true belief.

4. Is some knowledge intrinsically valuable?

At this point we might wonder whether the value of knowledge is only ever instrumental. That is, we might wonder whether the value of knowledge is always dependent upon what further goods, such as gaining relief from your illness, which knowledge (in this case of the correct diagnosis of your illness) can help you attain. Intuitively, this claim is too strong in that there do seem to be certain kinds of knowledge which have a value which is not purely instrumental. Put another way, some kinds of knowledge seem to have an intrinsic value.

If something has intrinsic value, then it is valuable in itself, regardless of what, for instance, it enables one to do. Friendship is intrinsically valuable, for example. We don't value our friends because they are useful to us (though having friends is undoubtedly useful), but simply because they are our friends. If you valued someone just for what they can do for you (help you to make more money, for example), then you wouldn't count as their friend. Put another way, although there is clearly

an instrumental value to having friends—they improve our quality of life, for example—the true value of friendship is not instrumental at all, but intrinsic to the friendship itself.

In order to see how knowledge could be intrinsically valuable, think of those types of knowledge which are very refined, such as wisdom—the sort of knowledge that wise people have. Wisdom is clearly at least instrumentally valuable since it can enable one to lead a productive and fulfilled life. Crucially, however, it seems that knowledge of this sort would still be valuable even if, as it happens, it didn't lead to a life that was good in this way. Suppose, for instance, that nature conspires against you at every turn so that, like the Biblical character Job, you are subject to just about every dismal fate that can befall a person. In such a case your knowledge of most matters may well have no instrumental value at all because your goals will be frustrated by forces beyond your control regardless of what you know.

Nevertheless, it would surely be preferable to confront such misfortune as a wise person, and not because such wisdom would necessarily make you feel any better or enable you to avoid these disasters (whether wise or not, your life is still wretched). Instead, it seems, being wise is just a good thing, regardless of what further goods it might lead to. That is, it is something that is good in itself; something which has intrinsic value. And notice that this claim marks a further difference between knowledge and mere true belief, since it is hard to see how mere true belief could ever be of intrinsic value.

There may be stronger claims that we can make about the value of knowledge, but the minimal claims advanced here suffice to make the study of knowledge important. Recall that we have seen that knowledge is at least for the most part instrumentally valuable in that it enables us to achieve our goals, and that it is more instrumentally valuable in this respect than true belief alone. Moreover, we have also noted that some varieties of knowledge, such as wisdom, seem to be intrinsically valuable. Clearly, then, knowledge is something that we should care about, and given that this is so it is incumbent upon us as philosophers to be able to say more about what knowledge is and the various ways in which we might acquire it. These are key goals of epistemology. [1]

References

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Pritchard, D. H. (2006). What is this Thing Called Knowledge?, London: Routledge.

Notes

1. This paper draws on material published in Pritchard (2006, chapter 2). The classic study of the value of knowledge in the recent literature is Kvanvig (2003). For a survey of the recent literature on the value of knowledge, see Pritchard (forthcoming).