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The Value of Knowledge Is External to It

With the scientific sophistication of the local news, I polled some folk (my son and daughter) about the value of knowledge. They apparently think of knowledge as Quine thinks of induction: Those eschewing it tend to fall off cliffs. Knowledge is good, the survey says, because you can make more money with it, get into a better college, get a better job, live a better life.

These answers are examples of finding the value of knowledge in its connection to practical affairs of life. Instead of tracing the value of knowledge to the value of its constituents or some intrinsic value that it has, these accounts claim that knowledge is valuable because it is useful.

The most obvious alternative to this account of the value of knowledge is the view that knowledge has value intrinsically. Academics often lament the pragmatism of undergraduates who prize knowledge only indirectly, in terms of what it can get for them in terms of money, prestige, power, and the like. Academics like to insist, instead, that knowledge is valuable for its own sake and not (just) because it helps you get a good job or get rich.

These two theories provide paradigm examples of the kinds of theories of the value of knowledge I want to explore, but they are only paradigms and not exhaustive of available approaches. The pragmatic theory is paradigmatic of theories that locate the value of knowledge in things logically distinct from knowledge itself, and the intrinsic value theory is paradigmatic of theories that locate the value of knowledge in things logically tied to knowledge itself. In this chapter, I will explore views that explain the value of knowledge in terms of things external to it, starting with the most obvious such theory, the theory that locates the value of knowledge in its usefulness.

There is much to be said on behalf of this account. First, we often explain things not going well in terms of a lack of knowledge. Parents often lament not doing a better job raising their children with the phrase "if we'd only known better." And sometimes, at least, the lack of knowledge provides insulation from moral responsibility. Many of our military were told, on assignment in Nagasaki after World War II, that the dangers of radiation exposure could be eliminated by taking a good shower every day. Perhaps the advisors knew better, but if they didn't, they have an excuse for the damage they caused. We often unwittingly hurt the feelings of those we care about and offer as an excuse that we didn't know what effect our actions would have. Medical personnel are exonerated in courtroom proceedings for damaging treatment because they simply didn't know and couldn't be held responsible for not knowing.

On the positive side, we often seek knowledge in order to obtain certain benefits. Those who invest in the stock market often spend enormous amounts of time in knowledge acquisition before making investment decisions, convinced that the additional knowledge will improve their likelihood of success. Good parents reward the search for knowledge in their children, viewing it as an indicator of success in life, and the most common defense given for spending time pursuing a college degree is that one's earning power will be greatly enhanced by the acquisition of knowledge that is required for the degree.

In a similar vein, it is often also said that knowledge is power. This slogan should not be taken literally, but it signals a perceived connection between what we know and the capacity for getting what we want.

It would be one-sided to ignore at this point the negative effects of knowledge as well, however. Knowing what causes pain helps torturers ply their trade; knowing that smallpox was deadly to native populations aided North American immigrants in destroying those populations.

So it is false to say that knowledge produces only good effects. The pragmatic theory of the value of knowledge need make no such claim, however. Instead of claiming that knowledge can only produce good effects, the pragmatic theory bids us to hold certain factors fixed in assessing the value of knowledge. Knowledge is valuable, on this account, because, in the hands of good and honest people, it opens up possibilities of good effects that wouldn't be available without knowledge.

It is in this special way that knowledge is associated with good things and the lack of knowledge with bad things in our ordinary patterns of

activity and in our conception of such. It is somewhat of a shock to this way of thinking, then, to find that the earliest philosophical investigations of the value of knowledge begin by challenging this association. In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates challenges Meno on this very question.[1] In particular, Socrates wants to know what makes knowledge more valuable than true opinion, and he points out that true opinions have all the practical benefits of knowledge. His example concerns traveling "to Larissa, or anywhere else you like" (97a). The man who merely judges correctly how to get to Larissa will nonetheless be every bit as successful in his journey as the man who knows the way. So Socrates rejects the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true opinion because of its practical benefits. As he puts it, "Therefore true opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly" (97b), and "right opinion is something no less useful than knowledge" (97c).

Notice, however, that the question shifts here from the one with which we began. We began wanting to know whether knowledge is valuable, and if so, why. If we infer a negative answer to the first question on the basis of Socrates' discussion, we may be accused of the following mistake. Suppose we want to know whether gold is valuable, and we try to answer that question by asking whether it is more valuable than platinum. Upon learning that it is not more valuable than platinum, we infer that gold is not valuable.

Of course, this analogy is not perfect if we assume that true opinion is among the constituents of knowledge. For once we acknowledge the relationship of constitution, other analogies become more appropriate. If we claim that a diamond ring is valuable, we might be corrected by someone who knows that the diamond taken from its setting would be just as valuable. Or, again, if a hero-worshipping Little Leaguer claims that his Ken Griffey, Jr., autographed baseball bat hits better because of the autograph, he would be wrong. The bat without the signature would be just as good (once we control for the placebo effect of the signature, of course).

We could escape Socrates' counterexample, however, if we were willing to claim that knowledge is valuable but no more valuable than true opinion. Yet, part of the challenge of explaining the value of knowledge is in explaining how it has more value than other things, one of these other things being true opinion – as Meno claims after acquiescing to

1. Plato, *Meno*; all quotes are from the W. K. C. Guthrie translation in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 353–84.

Socrates' point that true belief is every bit as useful as knowledge. "In that case, I wonder why knowledge should be so much more prized than right opinion" (97c–d). Meno expresses here a common presupposition about knowledge, one that is widely, if not universally, shared. Given this presupposition, an account of the value of knowledge must explain more than how knowledge is valuable. It must also explain why the value of knowledge is superior to the value of true opinion.

Socrates' claims are therefore telling against the pragmatic account of the value of knowledge. Knowledge is valuable because it is useful, but an account of the value of knowledge cannot be complete without something further. For true opinion, one of the constituents of knowledge, is equally useful, and yet knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. Hence the value of knowledge must be explained in terms beyond its pragmatic usefulness.

This conclusion holds so long as we refuse to identify knowledge with true opinion, an identification with which Meno toys ("I wonder . . . indeed how there is any difference between them" (97c–d)). Socrates uses an "analogy" (98b) to illustrate both the difference between them and the superiority of the value of knowledge over that of true belief, an analogy we shall look at carefully a bit later, and concludes

> But it is not, I am sure, a mere guess to say that right opinion and knowledge are different. There are few things that I should claim to know, but that at least is among them, whatever else is. (98b)

Socrates does not tell us how knowledge is different from right opinion, but he is convinced that there is a difference. So Socrates is convinced that he knows that the account of knowledge that Meno suggests is false. That fact is interesting in its own right, coming from a philosopher who conceived of his own wisdom in terms of an understanding of the limitations on what he knows, but equally interesting in the present context is the way in which Meno's theory is prompted. Meno's toying with the identification of knowledge and correct opinion is a result of having his proposed theory of the value of knowledge undermined, indicating an interplay in his mind between accounts of the nature of knowledge and accounts of the value of knowledge. For Meno, counterexamples to his suggestion about the value of knowledge tempt him to endorse an account of the nature of knowledge that blocks the counterexamples. Socrates' response is that even to one who knows (nearly) nothing, Meno's suggestion regarding the nature of knowledge is known to be false. This interplay between accounts of the nature and value of knowledge is no mistake on Meno's

part. It would be a strange dialectic to find a theoretician completely satisfied with an account of the nature of knowledge known to be incompatible with any value for knowledge. Coherence might be restored by some further explanation, and the point to note is the need for such further explanation to address the cognitive dissonance present in such a strange conjunction of epistemological views. The interplay between the nature and value of knowledge present in Meno's thinking exists because there is a presumption in favor of holding an epistemological theory responsible to two criteria. A correct account of the nature of knowledge must resist counterexample, but it also ought to be amenable to an account of the value of knowledge. Meno's inclination to abandon an account of the nature of knowledge should still arise, even if that account is able to resist counterexample, provided that account fails to allow an explanation of the value of knowledge.

Note what I am not claiming here: I am not claiming that an adequate account of the nature of knowledge must contain an explanation of the value of knowledge. Nor am I claiming that an adequate account of the nature of knowledge must appeal to elements of knowledge that are themselves valuable. I am not even claiming that knowledge is valuable. I am, instead, claiming a presumption in favor of the view that knowledge is valuable, and more valuable than subsets of its constituents, and that failed attempts to account for the value of knowledge legitimately prompt questioning of one's assumed theory of the nature of knowledge. The presumption in favor of the value of knowledge is strong enough that it gives reason to abandon even a counterexample-free account of the nature of knowledge if that account leaves no way open for defending the value of knowledge.

It is important to note here a further thing that I am not saying. When I say that there is a presumption in favor of the value of knowledge, I am not saying that the only way an account of the nature of knowledge can be adequate is to be capable of being supplemented by some adequate account of the value of knowledge. I leave open the conclusion at which I aim in this work, namely, that we are mistaken to attach such significance to knowledge, that the valuable accomplishments of cognition are to be found in the general area inhabited by knowledge but do not require knowledge itself. That is, when knowledge is valuable, its value is to be explained in ways that do not require the presence of knowledge for that value to obtain. Coming to such a conclusion should change our conception of the tasks for epistemology, and I will indicate some of the differences such a conclusion will make.

But where I will end up is not where I begin, for there is a strong presumption in favor of the view that knowledge is valuable. So we ought to begin by seeking an explanation of the value of knowledge, and my discussion of Plato's *Meno* is meant to highlight dual presumptive conditions of adequacy for a theory of knowledge. First, an adequate theory of knowledge must contain an account of the nature of knowledge that is, at a minimum, counterexample-free. (I ignore for present purposes other theoretical virtues that the account will need to possess to be preferable to other counterexample-free accounts.) Second, the theory must be amenable to an account of the value of knowledge. What do I mean by "amenable to"? At the very least, the theory must be logically consistent with an account of the value of knowledge, but perhaps something stronger is required. Perhaps the two accounts should fit well together or cohere in some way beyond being merely consistent with each other; but we shall start with the minimal requirement of logical consistency.

Given these twin desiderata, Socrates' counterexample to Meno's account of the value of knowledge shows that Meno's account cannot be adequate so long as knowledge is anything more than true belief. Meno's reaction is to consider the possibility that knowledge is nothing more than true belief, but Socrates immediately rejects this idea, and this reaction is nearly universally shared among epistemologists. But only nearly universally shared; recently, Crispin Sartwell has tried to resurrect Meno's theory,[2] seriously defending Meno's first shot from the hip when confronted with the problem of the value of knowledge. It is very hard, however, not to side with Socrates against Sartwell. Socrates provides an interesting analogy to display the difference between knowledge and true belief, as well as the more straightforward route in terms of a counterexample.

Such counterexamples can be multiplied. For example, one need only look at the voluminous body of literature on the Gettier problem to find counterexample after counterexample to the claim that knowledge is true belief. One can even find an unanswered counterexample in Sartwell's own work. He says:

> On the other hand, and this is where the present account runs into difficulties, we may be pressing the question of the source of belief. For example, if we find out that the claimant in this case has recently emerged from a mental hospital,

2. Crispin Sartwell, "Knowledge Is True Belief," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 28, 2 (1991): 157–65.

and regards the voices in her head as reliable sources of information, we may well ask how she knows that $2 + 2 = 4$. If she now replies that one of these voices told her, we may say (though with some strain to common sense) that she didn't know it after all.[3]

Sartwell notes immediately that his account "obliges me to deny this claim,"[4] but all we get by way of argument for such a denial is a remark that "it *is* natural in a case such as this one to say that we *all* know that $2 + 2 = 4$; it is 'common knowledge'; in a typical case it would be perverse to ask of any one person *how* she knows it."[5] None of these claims is a sufficient reply to the counterexample, however. It may be natural to say that everyone knows simple arithmetical truths, but it is false. It is natural to say it because the counterexamples are so rare, not because they do not exist. Second, simple arithmetical truths are among the items of common knowledge, as Sartwell points out, but not everyone knows all of these items. Finally, though it is clearly not perverse to ask someone how he or she knows such simple truths, it is certainly unusual. But many of the questions therapists need to ask mental patients in order to ascertain their degree of sanity are similarly unusual.

Hence, Sartwell has no good response to his own counterexample. In light of this and the multitude of other counterexamples, how could Sartwell maintain the view that knowledge is only true belief? The answer lies in the argument that persuades him to maintain this uncommon and implausible thesis.

Sartwell's argument[6] focuses on the question of the goal, or *telos*, of inquiry with regard to particular propositions, which he maintains is knowledge.[7] He argues that an adequate theory of justification will be teleological, a means to the goal of truth. The argument is, he thinks, simple – that justification is not necessary for knowledge:

> If we describe justification as of merely instrumental value with regard to arriving at truth, as BonJour does explicitly, we can no longer maintain both that knowledge is the *telos* of inquiry and that justification is a necessary condition of knowledge. It is incoherent to build a specification of something regarded *merely* as a means of achieving some goal into the description of the goal itself; in such

3. Ibid., p. 162.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 163.
6. Crispin Sartwell, "Why Knowledge Is Merely True Belief," *Journal of Philosophy*, 89, 4 (1992): 167–80.
7. Ibid., p. 173.

circumstances, the goal can be described independently of the means. So, if justification is demanded because it is instrumental to true belief, it cannot also be maintained that knowledge is justified true belief.[8]

Before commenting on the argument directly, I want to forestall one misunderstanding of Sartwell's conclusion. Because those familiar with the Gettier literature will balk at the claim that knowledge is justified true belief, it might seem that Sartwell's conclusion can be avoided just by holding that knowledge is more than justified true belief. But, as Sartwell makes clear, that would miss the point of the argument. Better put, Sartwell's conclusion is that if justification is of merely instrumental value, then knowledge is not even *at least* justified true belief. The instrumental value of justification is supposed to force us to take justification as only a criterion for knowledge, a mark we look for when we are trying to answer the question of whether someone knows, rather than a necessary condition for knowledge.[9]

The central stated premise of the argument for this claim is that "it is incoherent to build a specification of something regarded *merely* as a means of achieving some goal into the description of the goal itself." It is not obvious how to get from this claim to Sartwell's conclusion, but I think he is reasoning as follows:

1. Knowledge is the goal of inquiry.
2. Nothing that is merely a means to a goal is a necessary component of that goal.
3. Justification is merely a means to the goal of inquiry.
4. Therefore, justification is not a necessary component of the goal of inquiry.
5. Therefore, justification is not a necessary component of knowledge.

Premise 1, Sartwell admits, is undefended.[10] But that is not the primary defect of the argument. The primary defect is that this assumption simply will not be granted in the presence of premise 3, the claim that justification is a means to the goal of inquiry. Sartwell cites a long list of epistemologists who conceive of justification in instrumental terms, but they do not conceive of it as a means to the goal of inquiry except insofar as that goal is clarified in terms of getting to the truth and avoiding error. They do not conceive of justification as of instrumental value for knowledge,

8. Ibid., p. 174.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. In fairness to Sartwell, he does claim in footnote 11 that "I hope to establish this claim on completely independent grounds." I am unaware of any place where he tries to so establish the claim.

but rather for truth over error. So Sartwell cannot appeal to the views of epistemologists to establish the third premise of this argument unless he first abandons the first premise and clarifies the goal of inquiry in terms of truth.

Of course, if one already holds the view that knowledge is true belief, then one can easily accept both of these premises and even see the claims of epistemologists who endorse the view that justification is instrumentally valuable in the search for truth as supporting one's affirmations. But that is because one has already rejected the necessity of justification for knowledge. It appears, then, that the argument would only be accepted by those who already accept its conclusion.

What of the first premise, though? Is knowledge the goal of inquiry? I do not think that is the correct way to think of inquiry. When we engage in inquiry, we are trying to get to the truth about the subject matter in question. Inquiry ceases when we take ourselves to have found the truth. That is, human beings do not typically conceive of inquiry in terms of knowledge, but rather, to use a common phrase, as "the search for truth." Inquirers describe the task in these terms, and the object of their intentions, when inquiry is accompanied by such, involves the concept of truth. Of course, it can also involve knowledge, but it needn't. So no argument will be forthcoming from reflective descriptions of human beings or from the contents of their intentions that knowledge must be the goal of inquiry. Inquiry is not "directed at" knowledge in either of these senses by its very nature, but instead can be, and often is (perhaps usually is), "directed at" finding the truth and avoiding error.

The best that might be true is that successful inquiry yields knowledge, and so that knowledge is a product of inquiry successfully conducted and hence the, or a, *telos* of inquiry in that sense. This is a claim that, if true, will not rescue Sartwell's argument. If knowledge is the result of successful inquiry in this sense, it is possible for justification to be both a means to it and a constituent of it as well. If becoming elected a senator is the result of a successful campaign, then running a successful campaign can be both a means to this goal and a constituent as well. The tension Sartwell cites between constituents of and means to some item arises at most in the intentional realm, but need not arise once we leave that realm. Indeed, if we consider the general concept of a means to a goal, some compelling examples are where the means are sufficient to produce the effect. So Sartwell's premise implies that no means sufficient to produce X can itself be necessary for X. This claim, however, is obviously false; some means toward a goal are both necessary and sufficient for achieving that goal.

Most means to a goal are not sufficient for the achievement of the goal to which they are directed, so Sartwell might restrict the premise to talk only of such insufficient means. This alteration is still false, however. A means toward the goal of getting a million dollars is getting half a million, or getting nine hundred thousand, or getting the first dollar (a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step). Yet, each of these means is also a necessary constituent of the goal in question, so the alteration won't work either.

So Sartwell's argument is defective on several fronts, leaving his position that knowledge is true belief without adequate argumentative support. The proper conclusion to draw is that there is no reason to satisfy Meno's temptation by adopting the view that knowledge is true belief and many reasons against it in the form of counterexamples.

If knowledge is not true belief, then Socrates' counterexample shows that knowledge is no more practically useful than is true belief. So abandoning the claim that knowledge is true belief forces us to abandon the idea that the value of knowledge is to be accounted for by its practical significance in the lives of those who have it.

This conclusion is compatible with the claim that knowledge gives practical advantage to those who have it. It is just that the advantage they gain would have been achieved even if they had only gained true belief and not knowledge. So it is not their knowledge that explains their advantage but rather the fact that when one knows something, one has a true belief about it. Consider cases from the theory of explanation to make this point clear. A white, crystalline substance is immersed in water, and we want to know why it dissolves. Joe says it is because it is salt, but Billy disagrees. He says it is because it is *hexed* salt that it dissolves. If it is somehow useful to have a substance dissolved in our sample of water, we cannot claim that it is hexed salt that is valuable for that purpose. It does accomplish the goal we have in mind, but not because it is hexed salt; instead, it accomplishes the goal because all hexed salt is salt and salt dissolves in water. So hexed salt will be useful to us, but not because it is hexed salt. Instead, it will be useful to us because it is salt. Just so, knowledge is useful to us, but not because it is knowledge. Instead, it is useful because it involves true belief. Hence, pragmatic usefulness does not explain why knowledge is valuable; in particular, it does not explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief.

A natural response at this point might be skepticism concerning the value we seek to explain. We began by noting the value of knowledge and have found a sense in which it is valuable and a sense in which it may