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The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding

Epistemology has for a long time focused on the concept of knowledge and tried to answer questions such as whether knowledge is possible and how much of it there is. Missing from this inquiry, however, is a discussion of the value of knowledge.

In *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* Jonathan Kvanvig argues that epistemology properly conceived cannot ignore the question of the value of knowledge. He also questions one of the most fundamental assumptions in epistemology, namely, that knowledge is always more valuable than its subparts.

Taking Plato's *Meno* as the starting point of his discussion, Kvanvig tackles the different arguments about the value of knowledge and comes to the conclusion that knowledge is less valuable than is generally assumed. Instead, there should be more theorizing in epistemology on other cognitive successes, such as understanding, whose value is easier to explain.

Clearly written and well argued, the book will appeal to students and professionals in epistemology.

Jonathan L. Kvanvig is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Missouri, Columbia.

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Introduction

The history of epistemology centers on the concept of knowledge, especially on the difficult questions of whether knowledge is possible and, if it is, how much of it there is. A presupposition of this inquiry is that whether and to what extent we have knowledge is deeply important. Philosophers reflect on the nature and extent of knowledge not simply because they have free afternoons to fill but (also) because questions about what we know and how we know it touch on the deeply significant questions about the relationship between mind and world and the possibility of success in determining what is true and what is not. In a word, knowledge is valuable, and philosophers reflect on what we know because they share this viewpoint.

Given the centrality of this presupposition to epistemological inquiry, it is surprising to find so little discussion of the value of knowledge in the history of epistemology. Given the singular importance of the concept of knowledge to the history of philosophizing about the nature of cognitive success, we might have expected such inquiry to be preceded by a defense of the idea that knowledge constitutes an (almost) unsurpassable achievement with respect to the connection between mind and world. Such expectation disappoints, however. The question of the value of knowledge is simply not among the questions that dominate the history of epistemology.

Part of the reason for this omission may be that the answers to questions about the value of knowledge can seem to be rather short and sweet. Francis Bacon is credited with the idea that knowledge is power, illustrative of opinions that understand the value of knowledge in terms of the practical benefits it brings. Others, academics in particular, speak of the value of knowledge for its own sake, suggesting a further, nonpractical basis for

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maintaining the value of knowledge. Besides these commonplace ideas, there is the further point that knowledge has a distinctive kind of moral significance among the variety of illustrious cognitive achievements, for though we probably do not have a right to understanding or wisdom, we sometimes have a right to know. It is not a right that encompasses all topics or all truths, or even those topics and truths about which we are curious. Nonetheless, the right in question is one with some scope, signaling again the significance of knowledge.

In spite of the uncontroversial nature of these points, they are not truisms. One problem with these remarks was first introduced by Plato in the *Meno*, where Socrates defends the view that true belief works just as well for practical purposes as does knowledge. Moreover, there is some tension between the preceding points. For example, if knowledge is valuable, is it so on pragmatic grounds, or on other grounds, or perhaps on both?

These questions suggest some initial reason for thinking about how to account for or explain the value of knowledge, and part of my goal is to argue that epistemology properly conceived cannot ignore the question of the value of knowledge. I argue that reflection on the concept of knowledge reveals two significant questions about it, one concerning its nature and the other concerning its value. An account of the nature of knowledge incompatible with its value would be problematic, as would an explanation of the value of knowledge that assumed an inadequate conception of the nature of knowledge.

We can find a basis for both requirements for a theory of knowledge in Plato's *Meno*. Careful investigation of these historical roots of the question of the value of knowledge reveals several dimensions to this question. The first dimension focuses on the question of whether knowledge has value and what the explanation of this value might be. In the *Meno*, Socrates raises a further question, one that will occupy much of this work. For Socrates, the central question is not whether or how knowledge is valuable, but its comparative value, especially in comparison to true belief. This distinction is crucial, for if true belief is valuable, knowledge could be valuable simply in virtue of having true belief as a constituent. Socrates, however, believes that knowledge has a value surpassing that of true belief. If we assume that true belief is necessary for knowledge, Socrates' issue, transposed into the language of this assumption, is whether and how knowledge has a value exceeding that of its parts.

The most straightforward way to approach this question is to assume that the value of knowledge is a construction out of the value of its parts.

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Among the constituents of knowledge are belief and truth: Because the earth is not flat, no one can know that the earth is flat, and no one can know that the earth is round without believing that it is. There are purported counterexamples to these claims, but they are not persuasive. David Lewis, for example, considers a student who, he reports, knows when Columbus discovered America (because he answers correctly on a test), but doesn't believe anything here in virtue of being too uncertain of the date.[1] I reject this account of the case. First, answering correctly on a test is not a litmus test for knowledge. Either the answer is a sheer guess (the student perhaps knows that the discovery had to be in the last thousand years, and randomly picks three numbers to put after the number 1), or the student is answering based in part on information possessed. If the latter, the lack of confidence is not a sign of lack of belief; it is rather an indication of (second-order) uncertainty about the truth of what is believed. In that case, the case looks more like either a case in which the student knows the date but holds no opinion (is uncertain) about whether he or she knows the date, or a case of belief without knowledge. In the former case, in which the answer is a sheer guess, it is wholly implausible to think that a correct answer is an indicator of knowledge, for guesses are not knowledge.

Regarding the connection between knowledge and truth, it is becoming more common for students, infused with relativistic ideas, to maintain that it was once known that the earth is flat, but it is now known that the earth is round. Such students confuse knowledge with justified belief, however. What is true is that to the best of the knowledge at the time, the best viewpoint to adopt was that the earth was flat; in short, the viewpoint that was justified by the evidence was the flat earth viewpoint. Now we know better. That is, the viewpoint best justified by the evidence we possess is that the earth is not flat.

If such misstatement occurs often enough and becomes widespread enough, the term 'knows' will acquire a different meaning than it currently possesses. It may become a synonym for 'justified belief'. But it is not yet one, as is shown by the plausibility of the preceding explanation of the error made in saying that it was once known that the earth is flat. So knowledge requires truth (and always will, even if the meaning of the term 'knows' changes so that the sentence "Knowledge requires truth" comes to express a falsehood). Hence, another way to account for the

1. David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74,4 (1996): 549–67.

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value of knowledge is to derive it in part from the value of truth, or perhaps from the value of truth in combination with belief.

The other constituents of knowledge are more controversial. Some say that justification is a constituent of knowledge, and adherents of this viewpoint may attempt to account for the value of knowledge at least in part by the value of justified belief. Even if justification is required for knowledge, it is not sufficient for knowledge, even when combined with true belief. So at least a fourth condition is required, and the need for a fourth condition can lead one to suspect that justification is not required at all. It may be that whatever fourth condition one accepts makes justification otiose. In any case, the nature of the fourth condition for knowledge may also be appealed to in an account of the value of knowledge.

If we proceed straightforwardly to account for the value of knowledge, we will look at each of its components to see if they have value and explain the value of knowledge in terms of the increase in value contributed by each of these components. But some may not be happy with this manner of proceeding. As we shall see, it is very hard to account for the value of knowledge in terms of the value of its constituents, leading to an interest in a different approach to the question of the value of knowledge. Second, there is the rare breed who thinks knowledge is not composite. In either case, there is motivation for thinking of the value of knowledge in terms of knowledge itself rather than in terms of the value of its constituents, motivation for thinking that knowledge is valuable in itself, independently of its relationship to anything else, including its purported constituents.

As I have pointed out, the historical roots of this inquiry are found in the *Meno*, with the discussion between Meno and Socrates concerning the relationship between the value of knowledge and the value of right opinion. In order not to mislead, however, it is important from the outset to distance the problems and issues of this inquiry from the Platonic issue (or set of issues). I have already intimated that one way in which I diverge from the Platonic setting is that I will approach the problem of the value of knowledge assuming that true belief is a constituent of knowledge. Rather than propose to investigate the Platonic issue of the value of knowledge, I instead use Plato's discussion as a point of origin for an investigation that is a natural extension of it. Besides the point already noted, it would be objectionably anachronistic to introduce issues surrounding the Gettier problem into Plato's discussion of a few millennia earlier. It is also the case that there are a number of lines of inquiry that could claim to be legitimate heirs of Plato's discussion, and I make no pretext against such

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by labeling the problem I will address the *Meno problem*. The problem of how, and whether, knowledge has a value that exceeds that of its parts, the *Meno* problem, has its roots in the discussion between Socrates and Meno in Plato's dialogue, but I do not claim that it is precisely the problem that interests Plato or that there are no other issues surrounding the value of knowledge that can lay claim to being the natural offspring of Plato's discussion. The previously discussed possibilities of addressing the problem of the value of knowledge arise because of the specific nature of the problem of the value of knowledge that prompts this inquiry, rather than through exegetical inspection of the Platonic text.

These possibilities create a map of exploration of the question of how and whether knowledge has a value exceeding that of its parts. In Chapter 1, I examine attempts to find the value of knowledge in things external to it, including its practical benefits. I argue that such accounts fail to generate an adequate account of the value of knowledge. I consider and reject the practical benefits approach on the same grounds that Socrates rejects it, but I also consider two other proposals about how the value of knowledge involves things external to it. Both proposals originate in the work of Timothy Williamson, the first being that knowledge is more immune to being undermined by future evidence than is true belief, and the second depending on the claim that knowledge is the norm of assertion. I argue that neither of these approaches provides an adequate defense of the value of knowledge.

In Chapters 2 through 5, I explore the value of the purported constituents of knowledge, including truth, belief, justification, reliability, and a variety of approaches to the Gettier problem. These chapters evaluate the attempt to find the value of knowledge in terms of the amalgamation of the value of its parts, and in order to investigate this idea, I want to be liberal in granting theorists as much as I can as to what the constituents of knowledge are. So, for example, even though I have defended the idea that true belief is a constituent of knowledge, my investigation of the value of true belief does not require the endorsement of that idea. Instead, I grant the assumption to see how far the idea of accounting for the value of knowledge in terms of the value of its parts can be taken. A similar point applies to the ideas that justification is required for knowledge or that reliability of belief-forming processes is necessary for knowledge. Regarding each such proposal, I will grant the claim in order to focus on the question of the value of knowledge, rather than following what would be, given my purposes, the red herring path of debating the nature of knowledge.

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Granting these assumptions about the nature of knowledge is important for the relevance of these chapters to my project, for a satisfactory answer to the question of the value of knowledge will need to explain why knowledge is, by its very nature, more valuable than its parts. It will not be enough, for example, to show that sometimes or in some places knowledge is more valuable than its parts. Instead, we will need to show that no matter what the world happens to be like, knowledge is more valuable.

An example may help here. Suppose some (and only some) of our knowledge is infallible. If so, then knowledge of this kind is immensely valuable to have, for it involves beliefs about which we cannot be mistaken. Even so, the existence of such infallible knowledge will not assuage my concerns about the value of knowledge, for the existence of such could only show that *some* knowledge is more valuable than its parts. What we are in search of is something stronger: We want to find out whether knowledge is, by its very nature, more valuable than its parts, and no answer to this question can be satisfactory if it appeals to contingent features of knowledge.

So in investigating the relationship between knowledge and purported constituents of it, I grant for the sake of the inquiry the claims of constituency in order to focus on the question of the value of knowledge. In line with this approach, Chapter 2 argues that true belief is valuable, a task I approach by arguing for the value of belief and for the value of truth. I defend the value of belief against views that suggest that some weaker mental state is better or that merely acting as if certain claims are true would be better. Such arguments against the value of belief are commonly associated with Pyrrhonian skepticism and with the constructive empiricism of Bas van Fraassen[2] and related instrumentalist views in the philosophy of science. I argue against the view that some weaker concept than truth, such as empirical adequacy, suffices for our cognitive interests and needs. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the third condition for knowledge, normally expressed in terms of the concept of justification. Chapter 3 argues for the importance of a strongly internalist, subjective kind of justification, and Chapter 4 develops the special promise that virtue epistemology offers in the attempt to account for the value of knowledge. These chapters take us quite a ways toward explaining the value of knowledge in terms of the value of its constituents (assuming, again, that these purported constituents of knowledge are genuine constituents of it). The

2. Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1980).

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attempt to account for the value of knowledge in terms of the value of its constituents comes to an end in Chapter 5, however, where I argue for a hitherto unnoticed difficulty introduced by the Gettier problem. I explain how the Gettier problem, a difficult problem concerning the nature of knowledge, raises an insoluble problem concerning the value of knowledge. The Gettier problem creates a tension between the two requirements of a theory of knowledge, between the need to account for both the nature and the value of knowledge, for the better one's approach to that problem is in terms of accounting for the nature of knowledge, the less useful it becomes for the task of explaining the value of knowledge. I argue, that is, that the potential of an approach to the Gettier problem for adequately addressing the problem of the nature of knowledge is inversely proportional to the potential for being able to account for the value of knowledge.

Chapters 6 and 7 are motivated by the failure to develop an explanation of the value of knowledge on the basis of the value of its purported constituents, exploring more-direct ways of accounting for the value of knowledge. Chapter 6 argues against the claim that knowledge is valuable independently of any relationship to things external to it or to its purported constituents. Chapter 7 explores how nondescriptive approaches to the nature of knowledge might be used to account for its value and argues that such approaches to knowledge are not especially promising. Such an attitudinalist view of knowledge has been suggested by Hartry Field,[3] and I argue that versions of attitudinalism are also found in Mark Heller's version of contextualism and in John Greco's latest account of knowledge.[4] These chapters thus approach the question of the value of knowledge directly, one with descriptivist assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the other with nondescriptivist assumptions, and I argue that neither approach is successful.

Thus, I will be arguing that knowledge is valuable, but that it fails to have a value exceeding that of its parts, thereby leaving us with no adequate answer to the problem of the value of knowledge first posed by

3. Hartry Field, "The A Prioricity of Logic," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 96 (1996): 359–79; "Epistemological Nonfactualism and the A Prioricity of Logic," *Philosophical Studies*, 92 (1998): 1–24.
4. Mark Heller, "The Proper Role for Contextualism in an Anti-Luck Epistemology," *Philosophical Perspectives, 13, Epistemology*, James Tomberlin, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 115–29; John Greco, "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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Plato in the *Meno*. I will also be arguing that this conclusion should cause us to rethink our assumptions of the central concepts for epistemological theorizing. For, I will argue, there are other concepts with equal claim to theoretical importance for which we can provide an answer to Socrates' question. That is, we can cite some theoretical achievements that have more value than true belief and are more valuable than their parts, a topic that will occupy us in Chapter 8. In particular, I will argue in that chapter that understanding is just such an achievement, and the pursuit of understanding is no insignificant relative in the cognitive realm to the search for knowledge. The conclusion toward which I drive, then, is that epistemological inquiry deserves at least some enlargement in the direction of concepts other than knowledge.

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