

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

The Value of Knowledge and Truth

The questions concerning the value of knowledge and truth range from complete skepticism about such value to more discriminating concerns about the precise nature of the value in question and the comparative judgment that one of the two is more valuable than the other.

I. The Comparative Question and the Pragmatic Account

The history of epistemology has its conceptual roots in the dialogues of Plato, and the question of the value of knowledge and truth arises there as well. In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates and Meno discuss a number of issues, including the issue of the nature and value of knowledge. Socrates raises the question of the value of knowledge, and Meno answers by proposing a pragmatic theory: knowledge is valuable because it gets us what we want. Socrates immediately proposes a counterexample, to the effect that true opinion would work just as well: if you want to get to Larissa, hiring a guide who has a true opinion of how to get there will have the same practical results as hiring a guide who knows the way. Meno then voices a philosophically deep perplexity, wondering aloud why knowledge should be more prized than true opinion and whether there is any difference between the two. Meno thus questions two assumptions, the first being the assumption that knowledge is more valuable than true opinion, and the second that knowledge is something more than true opinion.

Socrates' counterexample suggests another: if you want to get to Larissa, it matters not

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

whether your guide has true opinion or merely empirically adequate views on the matter. To see the counterexample, we need to understand that an empirically adequate theory is one that “saves the appearances,” i.e., would never be refuted by any sensory experience. The simplest way to see that such a theory is not the same thing as a true theory is to consider skeptical scenarios such as Descartes’ evil demon world. The denizens of such a world will have roughly the same views as we do, and their views will be as empirically adequate as ours are. Since the demon is so skillful at carrying out his intentions, however, their views will be false even if ours are true. In such a world, there are no guides with true opinions about how to get to Larissa. Instead, the best one could get is a guide who has an empirically adequate view of the matter. Yet, if we compare the two situations, the one in the actual world where the hired guide has a true opinion, and the one in the demon world where the hired guide has only an empirically adequate opinion, no suffering accrues to traveler in the demon world that does not also accrue to the traveler in the actual world and no benefits are experienced by the traveler in the demon world that are not also experienced by the traveler in the actual world. That is to say, their experiences are indistinguishable, leaving us to wonder what practical advantage truth has over empirical adequacy.

II. Skepticism about the Value of Knowledge and Truth

Besides this Platonic threat to the value of knowledge and truth, there are other threats. One arises from the specter of skepticism. If we grant that there is no adequate answer to the skeptic, we might have the experience of philosophical sour grapes, denying the value of what

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig
we can’t have.

More respectable threats to the value of knowledge and truth come from positions that question the ordinary thinking that knowledge and truth contribute to well-being. Pyrrhonian skepticism maintains that such ordinary thinking is mistaken, and the path to happiness requires abandoning a search for knowledge and truth, ridding oneself of beliefs and instead “acquiescing to the appearances.” Arguments for skepticism play an important role in this process insofar as they can play a role in eliminating the dogmatism purportedly inherent in belief, but the Pyrrhonian appeal to skepticism is not simply that of philosophical sour grapes but motivated instead by a conception of what human well-being involves and requires.

There is no question that the Pyrrhonian school was sensitive to a real threat to human happiness, for dogmatism has caused immense suffering (as one monumental example, think of the suffering caused by religious wars). It is philosophical overkill, however, to move from such obvious points to skepticism and a denigration of the value of knowledge and truth. For one thing, dogmatism itself is compatible with a full appreciation of the rights of other human beings, and so need not lead to massive human rights violations. Moreover, even if dogmatism has practical consequences that are troubling, a defender of the value of knowledge and truth has a counterargument here. The typical epistemological approach involves abstracting away from the causal consequences of holding the beliefs in question, concerning itself more with intrinsic features of cognition, the kind reflected in talk of inquiry for its own sake. When we engage in inquiry for its own sake, successful results will partake of a kind of success that is independent of any causal contribution to well-being or other practical concerns. When epistemologists reflect on the nature of successful cognition and the extent to which an organism achieves it, the

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

predominant approach has been to reflect on a kind of success that abstracts from the consequences of cognition, whether those consequences are practical, moral, religious, political, or social.

Given such an abstraction, a defender of the value of knowledge and truth can argue that even if Pyrrhonism is correct as a general approach to cognition, it fails to show that from the abstract point of view of what is involved in inquiry for its own sake, knowledge and truth are not valuable. One of the factors to be considered in evaluating the plausibility of any view regarding the all-things-considered value of knowledge and truth is the perspectival value these things such as the value from the perspective of inquiry for its own sake.

Moreover, the argument for Pyrrhonism as the best view of the all-things-considered value of knowledge and belief is weak. To the extent that dogmatism itself has untoward consequences, the proper remedy is a sense of human fallibility, and only a highly questionable theory of knowledge that identifies knowledge with infallible knowledge could view skepticism as the only antidote to dogmatism.

Another threat has arisen in the latter half of the twentieth century, from those whom Bernard Williams in his last major philosophical work (2002) labelled “deniers” of the value of truth. Some of these deniers claim, in post-modernist spirit, that the ideals of truth and objectivity in inquiry are pretensions in service of other, baser motives. The problems for such denials of the value of truth arise when attempts are made to delineate accurately the nature of the pretensions in question and the lessons to be learned about the human condition from such investigation. Some, such as Richard Rorty (1989) have wanted to espouse views while at the same time denying their accuracy, but such a position is not intellectually stable. The instability

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

of the view is masked by the false dilemma involved in always capitalizing terms like “Truth” and “Reality” to gain purchase for the view that these concepts always and everywhere posit a metaphysical space hidden behind the pale of language or experience, yielding the claim that inquiry should aim at something weaker than truth such as widest possible agreement (see Rorty 1998). As Williams points out, however, it makes little sense to value the number of converts to a view unless convincing them of the view has something to do with convincing them that the view is true. Put more generally, among the regulating ideas concerning truth is that there is an obvious logical equivalence between p and *it is true that p* , so that to assert a claim is to represent that claim as being true, and no philosophical sleight of hand involving capitalization of terms or scare-quotes, as such deniers are wont to do, undermines this central point about truth. The deniers may have useful and important critiques of pretensions to objectivity, but it is a fundamental principle of inquiry that claims and arguments that are self-refuting should be avoided.

III. The Nature of the Value in Question

So the primary questions regarding the value of knowledge and truth are these. The first is whether knowledge and truth are valuable all-things-considered. A second question is whether they are valuable from the abstract point of view of what is involved in inquiry for its own sake. And a third question adverts to the issue about explanation, asking whether it is really knowledge that is valuable from this purely cognitive point of view, or something else instead.

The first question is a very large one, but a proper answer to it depends on answers to the

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

second two questions. For if knowledge and truth do not pass scrutiny when considered from the purely cognitive point of view, then they have little to be said in their favor from an all-things-considered point of view. Furthermore, a negative answer to the third question would threaten the significance of a positive answer to the second question.

A. The Value of Truth

The major concerns involved in the third question are whether knowledge is more valuable than its parts and whether truth has anything to be said on its behalf over mere empirical adequacy. From a purely cognitive point of view, as William James (1897) noted, human beings are motivated by two primary concerns, a concern for not being duped and a concern for not missing out on something important. The first concern is relevant to the issue regarding whether truth has anything to be said on its behalf over mere empirical adequacy. If we adopt the literary device of a narrator commenting on various scenarios, we find something of an answer to this question. If one of the scenarios is the evil demon world and the other the actual world (as we suppose it to be), with the narrator being the very same person as the individual in these scenarios, the narrative will almost certainly treat the evil demon scenario as disturbing in comparison to the actual scenario, precisely because one is being duped in the former but not in the latter. The proper explanation of this response is that we find getting to the truth intrinsically valuable in virtue of our concern for not being duped.

The second concern above, the concern for not missing out on something important, raises a further problem, the problem of whether all truth is intrinsically valuable or only the

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

important truths (see Sosa 2003). It is certainly true that we view some truths as simply unimportant, but that fact need not be taken to undermine the intrinsic value of truth, for it may be that our practical needs, goals, and interests interact with the intrinsic value of truth so that some truths are simply unimportant, all things considered, even though truth is still intrinsically valuable from a purely cognitive point of view or from the point of view of inquiry for its own sake.

B. The Value of Knowledge

The value of truth raises the question whether knowledge is more valuable than its parts, and an affirmative answer to this question faces serious obstacles. Note first the variety of ways one might defend the value of knowledge. After seeing the above defense of the value of truth, a first way would be to argue that knowledge is intrinsically valuable, valuable independently of any value possessed by its parts, and more valuable intrinsically than any collection of its parts. It is instructive to note that such a maneuver is not as promising here as it is in the case of truth. On the one hand, when asked, “why, from a purely cognitive point of view, do you value truth?” we are hard-pressed to say anything informative at all, and this difficulty is an indication that we do not value truth on the basis of our valuing something else, but rather that we value it intrinsically. On the other hand, when asked, “why, from a purely cognitive point of view, do you value knowledge?” we are inclined to answer. Our answer might be that we want to be correct, but not merely by accident, as happens when one has merely a true belief. The inclination to answer in ways such as this one suggests that we value knowledge in a way

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

different from the way in which we value truth, that even if truth is intrinsically valuable, knowledge is valuable because of the features that distinguish it from true belief.

What are these features? The standard view is that knowledge is true belief that is justified, but the literature deriving from Gettier’s classic paper of 1963 shows that no fallibilist view about justification can accept this account of knowledge. Fallibilism about justification is the view that justified false beliefs are possible, that no matter how good our evidence is for what we believe, we might still be wrong. Given this view, it is unavoidable that there will be cases of justified true belief that are not cases of knowledge. Hence another condition—a fourth condition—must be added.

1. Justification and Knowledge

We should expect to find the value of knowledge, then, by examining the value of the additional elements of knowledge—justification and whatever fourth condition is needed. The standard conception of justification makes it difficult to use in a defense of the value of knowledge, however. The standard conception of justification is teleological, where holding justified beliefs is the proper means to adopt when one’s goal is to get to the truth (and avoid error). If we think of means to a goal in terms of that which makes achieving the goal likely, the standard conception of justification amounts to the idea that justification is a property of a belief in virtue of which that belief is objectively likely to be true.

A theory will need to say something different from the simple claim that justification is to be understood in terms of objective likelihood of truth, however, if it is to have any hope of

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

providing a basis for explaining the value of knowledge over that of its parts. Recall that the task is to explain the value of knowledge over that of true belief, so if an appeal to justification is to aid in this task, the theory of justification provided must support the idea that justified true belief is more valuable than true belief. It is not enough merely that justification is a valuable property for a belief to have, for that result would only show that justified belief is more valuable than unjustified belief, not that justified true belief is more valuable than true belief. Another way to put this point is as follows: it is necessary for justification to be valuable for it to play a role in explaining the value of knowledge, but such value is not sufficient for it to play such a role.

The reason the value of justification is not sufficient is because of the swamping problem (Kvanvig 2003; Swinburne 2001; Zagzebski 1996). To see the problem, consider the following analogy. Suppose one wants to visit a nearby bookstore with a good philosophy section while visiting an unfamiliar city, and one searches the web to find where to go. Two sites are generated, one entitled “Bookstores with a good philosophy section” and another entitled “Bookstores likely to have a good philosophy section.” Presumably, one will be more interested in the first than in the second, but the relevant point to note in our context is something different. Suppose one takes the time to construct the intersection of the two lists, giving one a list of bookstores that both have and are likely to have a good philosophy section.

The point of the analogy is this: the first list is analogous to true belief, the second to justified belief, and the third to justified true belief. The swamping problem occurs because the third list is no more valuable than the first when one’s interests are simply to visit a bookstore with a good philosophy section. The swamping problem is simply that the value of justification is swamped by the value of truth when justification is conceived solely in terms of objective

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

likelihood of truth, for the same reasons that a list of bookstores that both have and are likely to have a good philosophy section is no more valuable than a list of bookstores that have a good philosophy section.

There are two ways to develop a theory of justification to address the swamping problem and thereby provide an account of justification that is helpful in an attempt to explain the value of knowledge. The first is to deny that the means-ends relationship needs to be one of objective likelihood. According to this approach, sometimes the means we adopt are nothing more than wishes or hopes or prayers for achieving the goals we have, but they are means to the goal in question nonetheless. For examples of such, think of the plight of the hopeless suitor, flailing away in the dark trying to find some way of winning the heart of his beloved. He knows he has no clue how to succeed and he knows that everything he tries may not even increase his chances of success. Even if they do not, however, they still constitute the means he has adopted to achieve the goal in question.

Just so, justification may be a means to the goal of having true beliefs without it being conceived to yield objective likelihood of having such. According to such subjective approaches, there is value in pursuing the truth by whatever means or methods are best by one's own lights, in full knowledge that these means or methods might have nothing more going for them than hopes and wishes. Moreover, the value added by this property is not obviously swamped by the value of truth in the way that the property proposed by objectively likelihood theorists is swamped, in much the same way that we value honesty and sincerity even when restricting our considerations to accurate reports. So one way of developing a theory of justification useful in the project of explaining the value of knowledge is to develop a subjective theory of justification.

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

The other way is to add further elements to the objective approaches so that the swamping problem is eliminated. One way to do so appeals to virtue epistemology, according to which knowledge is the product of the application of one’s intellectual virtues (Greco 2002; Riggs 2001; Sosa 2002). On a standard account of the intellectual virtues, a virtue is a stable trait of character that makes the beliefs it produces likely to be true. In this way, standard virtue theories adopt objective likelihood accounts of justification. They do not stop, however, with the idea that justification is, simply, objective likelihood of truth. They add that it is objective likelihood of truth that arises from the display of intellectual character. The true beliefs that result are not merely likely to be true, they also constitute *accomplishments* of the believer, so that having the true belief is something for which the believer is responsible. As a result, the cognizer deserves credit for having a true belief, and this credit is valuable in a way not explained by the likelihood that the belief is true. For this reason, virtue approaches to justification have some hope of avoiding the swamping problem of providing an account of justification useful in the project of explaining the value of justification in terms of the value of its parts.

2. The Fourth Condition for Knowledge

Were knowledge nothing more than justified true belief, these approaches to justification would give significant hope to the idea that knowledge is more valuable than its parts.

Knowledge, however, is more than justified true belief; it is justified true belief where the connection between justification and truth is, in an appropriate way, non-accidental. Various theories have been proposed regarding the appropriate kind of non-accidentality that is required

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

for knowledge, with the two most popular being the defeasibility theory and the relevant alternatives theory. There are serious worries that any approach to the fourth condition undermines the idea that knowledge is more valuable than its parts, and we can use these two theories to illustrate the difficulties.

The fundamental problem faced by all theories of the fourth condition is an insensitivity to the problem of the value of knowledge. In the *Meno*, Meno’s response to Socrates’s counterexample was to question why we prize knowledge more than true opinion and, indeed, whether there is any difference between the two. Meno’s response reveals an important constraint on a theory of knowledge. To the extent that the theory focuses on the nature of knowledge at the expense of being able to account for the value of knowledge, it is suspect; and to the extent that a theory focuses on the issue of the value of knowledge at the expense of being able to account for the nature of knowledge, it is suspect as well.

The two major approaches to the fourth condition cited above provide excellent illustrations of how to err in each of these directions. Take first the relevant alternatives theory. On a relevant alternatives approach, the difference between knowledge and justified true belief is determined by whether one would be immune from error in alternatives to the actual situation. In perceptual cases, for example, suppose the surrounding area is littered with fake barns, but one happens to be looking at the only real barn in the area. Then in alternatives to the actual situation, one is not immune from error, for had one been looking at a fake barn, one would still have believed of it that it is a (real) barn.

This theory handles the fake barn case quite well, but it also risks implying global skepticism, if we consider the alternative situation in which Descartes’ evil demon is operative.

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

In order to avoid this skeptical consequence, this approach introduces the qualifier “relevant”, and holds that the evil demon scenario is not a relevant alternative to the actual situation. The pressing issue for this approach is to specify what makes a situation relevant, and here relevant alternatives theorists have had little to say. The most simplistic version of the view would simply rely on our intuitive understanding of the concept of relevance, claiming that no more precise theoretical specification is needed.

Such a theory is well-suited to addressing the issue of the value of knowledge. Immunity from error is itself a good thing, and it would be hard to argue that one should prefer such immunity in *irrelevant* alternatives to immunity in *relevant* alternatives. Whether this value could withstand the scrutiny needed to provide a full and complete answer to the question of the value of knowledge would remain to be seen, but the theory provides some hope of such. It provides such hope by identifying a property with obvious evaluative dimensions, and in this way follows the strategy of addressing the question of the value of knowledge by identifying evaluative features of knowledge not present in mere true belief or in justified true belief.

What this theory gains through the use of the concept of relevance in addressing the problem of the value of knowledge it sacrifices in addressing the problem of the nature of knowledge. For without some clarification of the concept of relevance, this approach is a non-starter for addressing the problem of the nature of knowledge. It is important to recognize explicitly the significance of the intuitive concept of relevance, however. For the evaluative nature of this concept gives one precisely what one would wish for when focusing on the question of the value of knowledge. It is unfortunate that the simplistic version of this approach has no similar hope of adequately addressing the question of the nature of knowledge.

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

The defeasibility approach begins from a starting point that appears attractive in the search for a solution to the problem of the value of knowledge as well. The starting point for such theories is that what distinguishes knowledge from mere justified true belief is the absence of defeaters—information which, if acquired, would undermine the justification in question. In the fake barn case above, the further (unknown) information is that the landscape is littered with fake barns that cannot be distinguished from real ones.

This starting point is attractive from the point of view of the problem of the value of knowledge, for it cites a valuable property for a belief to have. It is valuable to have a belief whose justification cannot be undermined by learning any new information. The problem is that this starting point is inadequate, and to the credit of defeasibility theorists, they move beyond the simple relevant alternatives theory above by providing detailed and sophisticated accounts of precisely what unknown information undermines knowledge.

These accounts thus provide the detail needed in a serious effort to uncover the nature of knowledge, but the details of these accounts are completely insensitive to the question of the value of knowledge. The standard approach to developing the needed detail is to assemble a stable of examples, some of which involve knowledge and some of which do not, and attempt to find some distinguishing feature of the defeaters in cases of knowledge to use in refining the initial insight of the defeasibility theory. The result of this strategy is an approach that has little hope of providing a defeasibility condition that tracks any difference in value, and thus provides little hope in the attempt to explain the value of knowledge over that of its parts.

For example, consider one of the ways the simple defeasibility account is inadequate. Testimony by reliable persons often provides defeaters for what we are justified in believing.

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

Suppose we have visual evidence that a friend, Tom, left the library at 11 p.m. Our justification can be defeated if Tom’s mother says that Tom has an identical twin that we did not know about who was in the library while Tom was at home fixing his mother’s dishwasher. Whether it undermines our knowledge, however, depends on other factors such as who she reports this information to and what they know about her. It doesn’t undermine our knowledge if she fabricates the testimony to the police who are checking out a crime that occurred in the library, and the police have a large file of made-up stories from this woman in defense of Tom, who has a long criminal record, especially if the file contains precisely this concocted story which the police have already checked in prior cases, discovering that Tom is an only child.

The simple defeasibility approach was attractive in the search for an explanation of the value of knowledge, because it is valuable to have opinions that no further learning can undermine. Once we see cases such as the above, however, the defeasibility approach loses this attractive feature, for one can have knowledge even when further learning would rationally undermine one’s opinion. In such cases, it is true that even more learning would restore one’s original opinion, but there is little comfort to be found there, for the same will be true of any true belief, since if one knows all there is to know about a given claim, one will believe it if and only if it is true.

Defeasibility theories have had considerable difficulty in finding a condition that properly distinguishes when defeaters undermine knowledge and when they do not. The problem created by such approaches for the problem of the value of knowledge, however, is the tortured and *ad hoc* way in which various complex conditions are proposed to do the job. In light of the labyrinthine complexity that such accounts of knowledge display, no optimism is justified that

“The Value of Knowledge and Truth,” Jonathan L. Kvanvig

such conditions will track any value difference between satisfying those complex conditions and not satisfying them. It appears that the most warranted conclusion to draw is that the task of distinguishing cases of knowledge from cases of non-knowledge has been revealed to be so difficult that epistemologists make progress on the question of the nature of knowledge only by proposing conditions that undermine any explanation of the value of knowledge by appeal to those conditions.

IV. Conclusion

So the idea that truth is valuable on intrinsic grounds from a purely cognitive point of view may be defensible, but the same kind of defense of the value of knowledge is implausible. Instead, the more plausible approach tries to show that knowledge is valuable in virtue of its parts, but attempts along these lines founder on the admission that knowledge can be fallible. Such a result is compatible with truth and knowledge being valuable both from a purely cognitive point of view and also from an all-things-considered point of view, but knowledge will not have the type of value it is ordinarily assumed to have.

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