Curiosity, Interest, and the Value of Truth

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Many people think that truth is the goal of inquiry. Many people also think that the value of truth depends, in some way, upon the fact that it is the goal of inquiry. On this line, very roughly, truth is valuable for its own sake if and because it answers our intellectual inquiries and questions.[1] In this paper I'll first examine how this explanation of the value of truth is meant to work, raise some objections to this picture of the value of truth, and then explain the bearing of all this to questions of the value of knowledge.

I

When we inquire about something, most of the time we are interested in how it has a bearing on our practical interests. Thus, we make inquiries about cinema times because we have a practical interest in seeing a particular film. But some of our inquiries express or represent an interest in truth *for its own sake*.[2] This is what Stephen Grimm calls "a purely epistemic or intellectual interest in finding the truth."[3] A number of philosophers have thought that the ground or origin of this kind of interest in truth lies in our natural curiosity. Thus, Carl Hempel maintains that inquiry follows on from "sheer intellectual curiosity, [from our] deep and persistent desire to know and to understand [ourselves] and [our] world." Alvin Goldman writes: "Our interest in information has two sources: curiosity and practical concerns. The dinosaur extinction fascinates us, although knowing its cause would have no material impact on our lives." Grimm comments: "According to both Hempel and Goldman…it seems that the reason why we desire truth for its own sake, and quite apart from our practical goals, can be traced to the fact that we are naturally curious beings. Even when nothing of practical importance seems to ride on finding out how things stand with respect to a certain subject, given our natural curiosity we simply have a natural interest in finding out how they *do* stand." We therefore have an interest in the truth for its own sake, which generates and guides intellectual inquiry, and is rooted in a natural curiosity to discover how things stand.

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[1] Grimm: "Christopher Hookway adopts a similar question-first approach to epistemic value. On his view, our primary epistemic business essentially consists in inquiry, and for Hookway inquiry consists in "an attempt to answer a question."

[2] Kvanvig talks of "inquiry for its own sake" with respect to this. He writes, "when we engage in inquiry for its own sake, successful results will partake of a

What is the scope of our natural curiosity? By the same token, what is the scope of our intellectual interest and our epistemic goal? Some philosophers – notably Kvanvig and Lynch – maintain that there are no limits on our natural curiosity, and that as a result we have an interest in truth which is "open-ended

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kind of success that is independent of any causal contribution to well-being or other practical concerns." And: "[one of]…the primary questions regarding the value of knowledge and truth…is whether they are valuable from the abstract point of view of what is involved in inquiry for its own sake." And: "truth is still intrinsically valuable from a purely cognitive point of view or from the point of view of inquiry for its own sake."

[3] See also Michael Lynch: "There are times in all of our lives when we simply want to know for no other reason than the knowing itself."

or unrestricted." On this picture, "finding out the truth with respect to *any* subject would seem to be worthy of our interest." But we have good reason to be sceptical about these claims, given the fact that we do not seem to be naturally curious about everything, and would not be even if there were no practical restrictions on our time and effort. As Grimm puts it, there are "countless truths [which seem] flatly indifferent to us, considered from the epistemic point of view." Ernest Sosa provides the following example: "At the beach on a lazy summer afternoon, we might scoop up a handful of sand and carefully count the grains. This would give us an otherwise unremarked truth…[However], the number of grains would not interest most of us in the slighted." If this is correct, our interest in truth is not open-ended or unrestricted: it is not truth *simpliciter* which attracts our curiosity, but instead particular truths, that is, truths which strike us as interesting or fascinating or important. Actually, this is not quite right. It cannot be significant or interesting truths which spark our curiosity and stimulate inquiry; if we are aware of significant truths, we have no need to engage in inquiry in order to discover them. So the idea must be that our curiosity is triggered or sparked by particular *subjects* or *questions* – namely, ones which strike us as interesting or fascinating or important – with the result that we have an intellectual interest in finding out the truth about such things. Our interest in the truth is thus restricted to an interest in truth about subjects which strike us as worthy of interest.

(This might strike us as too quick. As Duncan Pritchard has pointed out in correspondence, "just because we don't care about believing some truths does not mean that we don't value true belief *simpliciter*. Or, at least, this does not follow unless we construe the claim that we value true belief as the claim that, for any truth and in any circumstances, we desire to believe it. This seems like an unduly strong rendering of the thesis that we value true belief though." Pritchard suggests instead that we understand this thesis as the claim that the truth of p is always a *prima facie* reason to desire to believe p, where (since it is only prima facie) this reason could be overridden by other (typically practical) factors. However, I think that we can construe the claim that we value true belief in a way which is considerably weaker than the above, and still maintain that we don't value truth *simpliciter*. Suppose we construe the claim that we value true belief simpliciter as the claim that, for any truth, there is at least *one* circumstances in which we desire to believe it for its own sake. I think that this is false in the case of trivial and mundane truths, such as the truth about the number of grains of sand in a random handful. I can of course come up with situations in which I am motivated to find out the truth on this – when I am utterly bored, for instance. But here my interest is not in the truth for its own sake, but is generated by my need to prevent boredom. If that goal is achieved, it will not matter if I've slightly miscounted and made an error of a grain or two. I therefore doubt that there is even a *prima facie* reason to desire the truth for its own sake on these kinds of propositions.)

How does this relate to the question of epistemic value? If the above picture is correct, then we have, simply in virtue of our natural curiosity, the epistemic or intellectual goal of finding out the truth on subjects or questions which interest us. With respect to these subjects, we value getting the truth for its own sake. Since we have this goal, then we will regard it as *prima facie* good, for all questions that interest or fascinate us, to believe what is true with respect to those questions, and to avoid believing what is false. Given this, it might seem obvious that the truth on these issues *is* valuable. Thus, as Goldman writes: "Truth acquisition is often desired and enjoyed *for its own sake*, not for ulterior ends. It would hardly be surprising, then, that intellectual norms should incorporate true belief as an autonomous value, quite apart from its contribution to biological and practical ends." For Goldman, the claim that truth is an autonomous value – that is, is valuable as an end – seems to follow naturally from the fact that we value truth for its own sake; the fact that we care about certain truths for their own sakes is taken to imply that certain truths are *worth* caring about in this way.

But now *this* might strike us as too quick. For it is a commonplace in value theory that the fact that I care about something doesn't imply that I am right to do so. It is thus widely held that my caring about something isn't good evidence of its value, or isn't a condition of its value, unless it has a certain positive normative status. If so, we might doubt whether the fact that I regard the truth (on particular subjects) as worth caring about for its own sake implies that the truth (on these subjects) *is* worth caring about for its own sake. Indeed, we might even doubt whether the fact that people are generally interested in getting the truth on issues which trigger their curiosity implies that getting the truth on such issues has final value. The fact that people have some natural preference or inclination does not, in and of itself, indicate that the object of that preference or inclination has value.

In support, note that it is at least possible that my caring about the truth on this particular subject reflects a subconscious concern for something other than truth. Perhaps it is not finding out the truth as such on this subject which triggers my curiosity, but something else; perhaps the truth on this issue will serve some practical purpose, or satisfy some unacknowledged desire, and that I wouldn't be concerned for the relevant truth in the absence of these other motives. In this instance we might very well doubt that discovering the truth on this issue is valuable for its own sake. Indeed, we might allow for the possibility that some unacknowledged practical purpose or desire underlies a *general* curiosity with the truth on particular subjects. We might not, that is, be naturally curious about truths for their own sakes, but for what are ultimately practical purposes.[4] Even if we ignore this problem, we might think that the fact that I genuinely do care about the truth on some issue for its own sake doesn't entail that the truth on this issue is valuable, since there might be other factors which mean that I ought not to care about the truth in this instance. For instance, it might be the case that the truth on some issue is disturbing: think of the ending to the Dutch thriller *The Vanishing* – a film where, if you make it to the end, you will probably regret that you did. Or consider the kind of curiosity that leads people to read books about serial killers like Fred and Rosemary West. Or to take a philosophical example, think of Leontius's regret in *The Republic*, who berates himself after satisfying his curiosity to see a number of dead bodies. Here the fact that someone is naturally curious about the truth for its own sake on these issues does not imply that the truth on these issues has final value, since we might think that he or she ought not to care about the truth in such cases. Now it might be thought that there are good *moral* reasons not to be morbidly curious. This doesn't imply that there is anything epistemically or intellectually suspect with such curiosity. But suppose, then, that my interest in a subject would completely disappear were I to stop and think for a moment about whether the truth on this subject was worth pursuing: here we might very well think that the fact that I was initially or momentarily curious and interested in the truth on the subject has no real bearing on the value of the truth on that subject. This indicates that there is a gap between an interest in the truth on a certain subject, and the value of discovering the truth on that subject. In the following section I'll consider how we might close this explanatory gap between the fact that we are naturally curious creatures and the value of truth as a goal.

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[4] At times Lynch suggests that our pattern of cares and concerns constitutes good evidence for what really is of value. Thus, to take a well-known example, the fact that we would be reticent to plug in to an 'experience machine' is good evidence that life on that machine is less valuable than real life. However, some people are dubious about this claim, on the grounds that perhaps a decision not to plug in to the machine reflects a concern which is *independent* of the values of the fantasy life and the real life. If so, they maintain that we cannot simply read off what is genuinely valuable from the fact that people typically have certain preferences or concerns.

II

What is the connection between an interest in the truth for its own sake and the final value of truth? How can we move from the claim that we are naturally curious to discover the answers to particular questions to the claim that answers to those questions *are* valuable in themselves? The worry, as we saw, is that there might be something amiss with our curiosity or concern, which casts doubt upon the value of the truths which constitute the object of that concern. A simple solution might be to idealise the relevant concern for truth. Thus, we might claim that the truth on a certain issue is valuable if someone *would* care about the truth on that issue under certain idealised conditions: if, for instance, they meet certain criteria constitutive of full rationality.

There is, however, a problem with attempting this move here. This is because the usual method of idealizing a subject's actual cares and concerns involves appeal to what the subject would care about if she were better informed, and had a more coherent and consistent desiderative profile. But how much information should we require in order for someone's curiosity to be sufficiently informed? If the person is provided with too little information, we might worry about whether her curiosity is sufficiently idealised. If the person is provided with too much information, however, it is more than likely that her curiosity will disappear. So the typical move in value theory to idealize conative elements like desires and preferences fails to be plausible when applied to our curiosity about the truths on particular subjects. (In response, Duncan Pritchard has raised the possibility of a suitably idealised agent who retains the *same* information base, but has improved cognitive traits: think, for instance, of the idealised agent as someone who possesses the intellectual virtues. We might doubt that there will be much amiss with the cares and concerns of this person. But I'm suspicious about this possibility. Suppose that the relevant information base contains lots of falsehoods, and that the subject's questions depend upon these falsehoods: for instance, suppose that our subject is curious as to the reasons why Japan were allied with the United States in the Second World War. In order for some intellectual concern to be appropriate, we might think that it must not be based on any false beliefs. But intuitively, we can cast doubt upon a subject's concern with a particular issue if that concern would disappear were the subject to know just a little bit more about it. So I don't think that we can have a suitably idealised account on the basis of the same information set.)

A second possibility of closing the gap focuses on the fact that curiosity – even intellectual curiosity – is an emotional response. If so, we might argue by analogy for a link between what we are naturally curious about and the value of truth. To see how this might work, consider the following from Annette Baier: "We all accept the idea that emotions are reactions to matters of apparent importance to us: fear to danger, surprise to the unexpected, outrage to insult, disgust to what will make us sick, envy of the more favoured, gratitude for benefactors, hate for enemies, love for friends, and so on. And sometimes the felt emotion can precede knowledge of precisely what the danger, the insult, the nauseating substance, and so on is. Emotion then plays the role of alerting us to something important to us – a danger, or an insult."[5] There is, moreover, considerable empirical evidence supporting this commonplace about emotions and values, by indicating how emotions improve our capacities for detecting and analysing important stimuli. With respect to detection, evidence indicates that subjects perform better on visual search tasks – that is, the time taken for subjects to detect a particular target *decreases* – when the target of their search is an emotional target, such as a face expressing positive or negative emotion, a snake, or a spider. This suggests that emotions increase the speed at which we can identify and attend to significant events in our environment. This is especially true for subjects suffering from anxiety or phobia.

If emotions have the role or function of alerting us to evaluatively significant or important events in our environment, then the fact that curiosity is an emotion which is typically automatically triggered by certain subjects or topics might be good evidence for the fact that topics or subjects which in fact trigger our natural curiosity are *worth* investigating. Indeed, we might think that curiosity would not have evolved and persisted if this were not the case. So the nature of curiosity as an emotional response might ground the claim that our natural curiosity is evidence for or a condition of genuine value.

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[5] In 'Feelings that Matter', in *Thinking about Feeling*, Robert Solomon (ed), Oxford University Press (2004), p. 200.

Unfortunately, this argument fails to close the explanatory gap. It might be true that curiosity alerts us to important or significant events, without this entailing anything about the final value of true belief. After all, as the adaptive-evolutionary story about emotions indicates, emotions alert us to the presence of events and objects which are important or significant for our *practical* goals, viz., avoiding danger, contamination, combatting insult and enemies, and so on. So the fact that emotions (usually, typically) alert us to the presence of things that really do matter in light of our practical goals does not support the claim that curiosity (typically, usually) alerts us to the presence of something that is valuable for its *own* sake.

A third attempt to bridge the explanatory gap would be to claim that certain subjects or questions are *intrinsically* interesting or fascinating, and as a result *ought* to spark our curiosity. By the same token, we can maintain that certain other topics or issues are intrinsically boring or mundane, and as a result ought not to be targets of our intellectual interest. In light of this, we might then claim that the truth on a certain issue is valuable if and only if the issue is intrinsically interesting, and thus one which ought to spark one's curiosity. On this line, it is *prima facie* good, for all subjects that are intrinsically interesting, to believe what is true with respect to those questions and avoiding believing what is false. For instance, questions about how and why the dinosaurs became extinct, or about how Stalin came to power, or about the extent to which chimpanzees are self-aware, or about the prospects for travelling to Mars, or about the problem of induction, all strike us as interesting, fascinating, worthy of inquiry and investigation. These are the kinds of subjects which are worth caring about, which ought to spark our curiosity – at least, other things being equal. As a result, the truth about these subjects seems valuable for its own sake. Other subjects and questions – such as questions about the way in which I tied my shoelaces this morning, or about the average price of a pint of milk in Aberdeen – are intrinsically uninteresting, boring, and mundane. Curiosity about such subjects is not warranted, and the truth about such subjects is not worth caring about for its own sake.

This approach will only be intuitively acceptable given the following conditions: (i) that the range of subjects and questions which are to count as intrinsically interesting is very large, (ii) that any given individual will typically be uninterested in the vast majority of such questions, and that (iii) the individual who is uninterested in the vast majority of such questions does not thereby violate any epistemic norms or obligations. We can satisfy these conditions by suggesting that for all A, if a subject S is intrinsically interesting, then *other things being* equal A ought to care about the truth on that subject. However, it is rarely the case that other things *are* equal: normally our practical interests will preclude us from caring about the vast majority of subjects which are of intrinsic interest. What justifies these conditions? For one thing, we want to allow that someone can be uninterested in the question of how Stalin came to power, or about the possibility of life on Mars, and yet blameless from the epistemic or intellectual point of view. For another, by making the range of intrinsically interesting topics and questions very large, we can prevent a tendency to over-intellectualize the question of which truths are interesting or fascinating. Interesting questions need not all be about major historical figures or scientific theories. So someone can be legitimately interested in questions about which Scottish football team boasts the longest losing run, or about the identity of the original 57 Heinz varieties. We need to accommodate that fact that what people actually find interesting is massively varied; we need to allow that even trainspotters have appropriate interests in truths.[6] But this will also allow for the existence of subjects or questions which are intrinsically uninteresting: for instance, questions about the number of leaves presently on the football pitches on campus, or the length of time it would take me to completely cover the whiteboard with marker pen, or the frequency of number 44 buses in Stockport this week as opposed to last.

An appeal to the fact that certain subjects or questions are intrinsically interesting or fascinating might not close the explanatory gap, however. Suppose that certain subjects or questions are intrinsically uninteresting, such that someone who was curious about the truth with respect to those subjects might be criticisable on the grounds that they are interested in a subject which is uninteresting. This does *not* show that truths which result from such curiosity or interest would themselves *lack* value – although the person who is interested in such questions might be criticisable on other grounds. If so, the claim that the truth on a certain issue has final value only if the issue is intrinsically interesting is false. Consider, then, the following truths:

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[6] Indeed, I might be blamelessly interested in the way someone ties their shoelaces in the morning: Nicholson Baker has written an excellent book, *The Mezzanine*, in which the question of how the narrator ties his shoelaces is considered in great detail. It's not just that *he's* interested in this. People who read the book typically find his meditations on this and other related issues – about the history and development of a straw that will sink and not float when placed in a can of fizzy drink – fascinating as well.

- If the average man never trimmed his beard, it would grow to nearly 30 feet long in his lifetime.
- On average, right-handed people live 9 years longer than their left-handed counterparts.
- The average American will eat 35,000 cookies in a lifetime.
- The average lead pencil will draw a line 35 miles long or write approximately 50,000 English words.
- The only country in the world that has a Bill of Rights for Cows is India.
- Ancient Chinese artists would never paint pictures of women's feet.
- During the Alaskan Klondike gold rush (1897-1898), potatoes were practically worth their weight in gold. Potatoes were so valued for their vitamin C content that miners traded gold for potatoes.
- Dueling is legal in Paraguay as long as both parties are registered blood donors.
- It is forbidden for aircraft to fly over the Taj Mahal.
- A Saudi Arabian woman can get a divorce if her husband doesn't give her coffee.
- Offered a new pen to write with, 97% of all people will write their own name.
- In 1913, the US tax on a $4,000 annual income was one penny.

I take it that at least some of you will find some of these truths interesting or surprising or fascinating in their own right. As a result, at least some of you will be glad to know them: they will thus have value for you. However, it seems clear that such truths can result from inquiries which are intrinsically uninteresting, boring, or mundane. Could anything be more boring than an investigation into the cost of potatoes in the late 19th century? Could anyone legitimately be interested into the question of whether there are any links between coffee consumption and divorce in Saudi Arabia? Which rational person would *want* to discover, for its own sake, the income tax rates in the United States in the year 1913? This means that there are some truths which are valuable – because they are intrinsically interesting, because we are glad to have them – even though they are not and would not have been the result of an inquiry into a subject which was itself interesting or significant. Boring subjects can contain fascinating truths. We cannot simply claim that truth is valuable only if it results from an inquiry into an intrinsically interesting or fascinating subject.

This raises a question about the other conditional, namely the claim that a truth has final value if it results from inquiry into an intrinsically interesting or fascinating subject. Here too we might be sceptical. For sometimes inquiries into fascinating subjects yield truths which are mundane, uninteresting, and unimportant. This should come as no surprise to people who have eagerly embarked on an interesting research project, full of questions which spark both their curiosity and the curiosity of the grant-awarding body, only to realise, towards the end of the inquiry, that any truths to be had here are trivial and uninteresting. If this were not the case, there would hardly be the widespread phenomenon of people being *disappointed* with the answers to their inquiries. Of course, some of the disappointment might be due to frustration of practical interests: an interesting answer on a hot research topic might make one's name, advance one's career, secure a job in a prestigious institution, and so forth. But some of the disappointment might be due to the fact that no-one, including oneself, is remotely fascinated or interested *in* the truths one has discovered, and as a result no-one is glad to know them. It seems clear that answers to interesting questions can sometimes be no more interesting or fascinating than answers to mundane questions.

What conclusions can we draw from this? The first conclusion is that some truths have value for us simply because, once we become aware of them, we find them interesting or fascinating: we are glad to know interesting and fascinating things. Other truths – those which we find uninteresting and mundane – lack this kind of value: we are not glad to possess or know these things. The second conclusion is that this seems to be a kind of value which is independent of our natural curiosity: in particular, it is a kind of value which is independent of the interest we have in answering questions and subjects which trigger our natural curiosity. As we have seen, there can be interesting truths which do not (and would not) result from any inquiry that we could characterise as interesting; moreover, there can be uninteresting answers to interesting questions. A third, and possibly more controversial, conclusion is this: insofar as we are disappointed with boring answers to our questions, insofar as we hope that our inquiries turn up interesting and fascinating truths, we might maintain that our epistemic goal is precisely to attain such truths. That is, rather than saying that our epistemic goal is, for all questions that interest us, to believe p if and only if p is true, we should instead claim that our epistemic goal is to believe p if and only if p is true *and interesting*. If this is correct then there are two ways in which we might fail to achieve our epistemic goal in some particular case: namely, believing what is false, and believing what is uninteresting. This is compatible with the claim that inquiring into interesting or fascinating questions often results in the acquiring of interesting or fascinating truths. But the fact that the resulting truth is interesting is in an obvious sense independent from the fact that the subject of the inquiry triggered our natural curiosity.

III

I want to deny, then, that it is *prima facie* good, for all subjects and questions that are intrinsically interesting, to believe what is true with respect to those subjects and avoid believing what is false. Instead, I want to claim that it is *prima facie* good to believe p for its own sake if and only if p is both true and interesting. This means that it is *prima facie* good to believe the truth that p for its own sake if this truth is interesting, even if it does not result from an inquiry into a subject which is interesting for its own sake, and hence a subject which should, other things being equal, trigger our natural curiosity.[7]

This has an important implication for recent virtue-theoretical attempts to explain the value of knowledge. In particular, it has an important implication for virtue epistemologists who seek to explain the value of knowledge in terms of a subject's getting credit for the truth of her belief. Thus, John Greco maintains that "to say that someone knows is to say that his believing the truth can be credited to him."[8] Further: "S deserves intellectual credit for believing the truth regarding p only if (a) believing the truth regarding p has intellectual value, (b) believing the truth regarding p can be ascribed to S, and (c) believing the truth regarding p reveals S's reliable cognitive character. Alternatively: S's reliable cognitive character is an important necessary part of the total set of causal factors that give rise to S's believing the truth regarding p." Elsewhere, Greco has claimed that "knowledge is a cognitive achievement, where achievements are understood as successes through skill."[9] For Greco and like-minded virtue epistemologists, the final value of knowledge is directly related to the fact that it is a cognitive achievement: as Duncan Pritchard has put it, the subject who has knowledge gets credit for "bringing about the positively valuable outcome of a true belief." If the arguments of the previous section are correct, however, we can raise doubts about this general approach to the value of knowledge. Let me explain.

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[7] We might maintain, nevertheless, that the value of truth is connected with another emotional response, for instance natural amusement or surprise at an interesting or novel or anomalous fact. But this is a possibility I won't explore here.

[8] See also Wayne Riggs, who distinguishes between the value of non-accidental and accidental true belief in the following way: "When a true belief is achieved non-accidentally, the person derives epistemic credit for this that she would not be due had she only accidentally happened upon a true belief…The difference that makes a *value* difference here is the variation in the degree to which a person's abilities, powers, and skills are causally responsible for the outcome, believing truly that p." Greco: "one of the

In his 2004 paper 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief', Greco introduces his account of intellectual credit by analogy with a different kind of credit, namely credit for athletic feats. Greco contrasts two cases where an action has "clear athletic value" – the action of catching a baseball. In the first, the agent catches the ball as the result of his great athletic abilities, whilst in the second the same agent catches the ball because of "dumb luck." We are inclined to give the agent in the first case credit for catching the ball, but not in the second case. The fact that the agent gets credit for athletic achievement in this case is due to the

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central functions of knowledge attributions is to give credit for true belief. When we say that S knows p, we imply that it is not just an accident that S believes the truth with respect to p. On the contrary, we mean to say that S gets things right with respect to p because S has reasoned in an appropriate way, or perceived things accurately, or remembered things well, etc. We mean to say that getting it right can be put down to S's own abilities, rather than to dumb luck, or blind chance, or something else."

[9] This formulation is due to Duncan Pritchard, in correspondence.

fact that his success was down to his skill, and this is why his catching the ball has greater value in the first case than in the second. Greco clearly thinks that something similar applies in the case of true belief: if a subject attains a true belief as a result of his cognitive skills, then this constitutes an epistemic or an intellectual achievement, and is something for which the subject gets credit. But if the subject attains true belief due to luck, then this fails to count as success which is due to the subject's skill, and therefore is not something for which the subject gets credit. This explains the difference in value between cases where a subject is responsible for the truth of her belief, and cases where she is not.

We might, however, wonder about the scope of Greco's explanation. Consider an athletic action which in itself has negligible athletic value, and for which the agent would not receive credit: Andrew Flintoff's scoring runs off my bowling. Since this is the bare minimum that such an athlete would be expected to do, their actions can hardly have clear athletic value: it would be bizarre for a commentator to *praise* Flintoff for hitting a boundary off one of my deliveries. This is because the bare minimum in such cases hardly seems like an *achievement* on the part of Flintoff, even though it is clearly something that he *does* and does as a result of his skill. Indeed, given the negligible value of hitting a four off my bowling, it seems implausible that what Flintoff does through the application of his skill any more value than his hitting a four as a result of dumb luck. (Wafting at a fly, and unaware that I've bowled the cricket ball, Flintoff might luckily clump the ball to the boundary.) When the athletic feat in question is of such negligible value, then it doesn't seem to matter that it was brought about as a result of athletic skill or as a result of something approaching dumb luck.

We can make a similar point about credit for true belief. Let us suppose that some true belief has epistemic value approaching zero: it is a proposition which is utterly trivial, boring, and mundane. It is difficult to see why knowing a trivial proposition somehow counts as an achievement or why a subject would get credit for *this* kind of true belief, even if the belief results from the application of the believer's cognitive skill. This is because it is difficult to see a trivial, boring and mundane truth as a positively valuable outcome in the first place. It certainly lacks *clear* epistemic value.[10] Indeed, we might think it somehow *inappropriate* to use one's epistemic virtues or skills to reach the truth on a boring proposition. Certainly, to return to the sporting analogy, there seems something inappropriate in Andrew Flintoff using his athletic skills to rack up a double century off my bowling. Shouldn't his athletic skills be utilised with respect to a more *worthwhile* target? Greco's sporting analogy thus suggests that knowledge of trivial propositions fails to count as a cognitive achievement, and thus fails to be something for which the subject can take credit. We can thus criticise Greco insofar as he suggests that even pointless achievements have final value insofar as they result from cognitive skill. This seems no more plausible than the analogous claim in athletics.

This does not, by itself, mean that we should reject Greco's account of the value of knowledge, since, intuitively at least, there *is* no difference in value between knowing that p and merely truly believing that p when p is trivial, boring, or uninteresting. The fact that Greco's analogy supports this intuition is thus a point in his favour. For instance, it seems implausible to maintain that it is somehow better for belief in a trivial proposition to be secure or tethered down, rather than insecure and liable to be lost. We might even think that it is better if a true belief in a triviality or mundanity is *not* tethered down: there *seems* something cognitively suspect about a person who *retains* boring information, after all. Moreover, if we can easily lose a boring belief, then it will be relatively easy for our set of beliefs to become less boring, at least by one. The fact that Greco's account of credit, generated by the sporting analogy, is compatible with this intuition therefore speaks in favour of is account. Unfortunately, the denial that there is a difference in value between knowledge and mere true belief when it comes to trivial or boring propositions poses a problem for Greco's capacity to explain the difference in value between knowledge and mere true belief when it comes to interesting or fascinating or surprising truths. For given the truth of the denial, then the only difference in value between knowledge of a trivial truth and knowledge of an interesting truth lies in the fact that the relevant truth *is* interesting. But if, as I'll now argue, the fact that some truth is interesting or surprising is not down to me – if I cannot take credit for the fact that my true belief is interesting or fascinating – then it seems that the difference in value is not down to me either, in which case I cannot take responsibility for the *positively* valuable outcome of having an interesting true belief. Greco's explanation for the additional value of knowledge over accidentally true belief with respect to interesting or surprising propositions is therefore suspect.

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[10] Otherwise, the question of the value of true belief in trivial propositions wouldn't be disputed.

In the previous section I argued that certain truths are valuable insofar as we find them interesting or surprising or fascinating when we are aware of them. I also maintained that we might therefore understand our epistemic aim as one of amassing or attaining interesting or surprising or fascinating truths. Now the question of whether we find some truth interesting or surprising is, clearly, dependent upon us – what I find interesting or surprising, you might find mundane. Nevertheless, it is in an important sense, *independent* of us: I cannot, after all, make myself be surprised by or interested in some answer. Whether the answer is surprising or interesting is, in an important sense, down to the world and not down to me. This is the moral of our rejecting the claim that interesting and fascinating questions necessarily result in interesting or surprising or fascinating answers: although we might be able to inquire about and pursue the truth on an intrinsically interesting topic or issue, there is no guarantee that the answers we discover will themselves be interesting or surprising, and thus no guarantee that they will have value for us. In many cases, it is not within our power to arrive at interesting or fascinating or surprising truths. Suppose, then, that I know some interesting truth. If Greco is right, I can take credit for two of the conditions for its value: namely, that it is true and that I believe that it is true. But if the fact that the truth is interesting or fascinating or surprising is not down to me, I cannot take the credit for having a true and interesting belief, and thus cannot take the credit for bringing about an outcome that is positively valuable in this way. This indicates a way in which athletic value is radically different from epistemic value: when a skillful fielder makes a great catch, or when Andrew Flintoff hits a century in an Ashes test, then we think that the value of his achievement is *entirely* down to him. This is not the case with epistemic value, if we agree that sometimes at least it is beyond our power to come up with a fascinating and surprising answers to our inquiries.

The obvious response for Greco and like-minded virtue-epistemologists would be to claim that I can be responsible for the fact that my belief is both true *and* interesting. We can be responsible for the truth of belief when the truth results from our following reliable methods. By the same token, we might think that there are obvious reliable methods for hitting upon fascinating or interesting or surprising truths: we can read a book of fascinating trivia, or open the encyclopaedia at a random page, or trawl the internet for surprising facts. But – as one who has recently engaged in such 'research' can confirm – it doesn't take long for lists of purportedly interesting facts and significant truths to become rather boring and mundane. Part of the explanation for this is surely that truths gleaned from the Guinness Book of World Records soon become no longer *surprising*, no matter how bizarre they are or how indicative of human stamina. So this method is – at best – a dubiously reliable and short-lived method of hitting upon valuable truths. It seems to me that a list of other reliable ways of attaining interesting, fascinating, and surprising truths will be short. (I suspect that academic research into interesting questions has a low hit rate in this regard.) As a result, I think it unlikely that Greco and other virtue-epistemologists could plausibly make claims about being responsible for the fact that what they believe is interesting and fascinating. It is doubtful, then, that this source of epistemic value is something that they can take credit for.

If this is the case, then the failure to explain the value of true belief in terms of our natural curiosity has implications not just for claims about the value of true belief, but also for claims about the value of knowledge.