

Chapter Nine. The Value Problem.

11-18-05d

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates raises a question about the value of knowledge. Why is knowledge valuable? Or perhaps better, What is it that makes knowledge valuable? Jonathan Kvanvig argues that this question is as important to epistemology as Socrates's question about the nature of knowledge, or what knowledge is. Any adequate epistemology must answer both the nature question and the value question. In fact, Kvanvig argues, the two questions interact: If a theory of knowledge does a poor job answering the value question, that counts against its answer to the nature question. Likewise, if a theory does a good job explaining the value of knowledge, that counts in favor of its answer to the nature question. This seems exactly right. Put another way, the value question is at the heart of the project of explanation. The task of explaining what knowledge is involves the task of explaining why knowledge is valuable.

Before looking more closely at Plato's question in the *Meno*, however, we should distinguish it from a question that we have already answered: Why is the *concept* of knowledge valuable? Our answer to that question was that the concept plays valuable roles in the lives of information-using, information-sharing beings such as ourselves. The human form of life demands good information and the reliable flow of that information. The concept of knowledge, along with related concepts, serves those needs. That is not yet to say, however, why knowledge is valuable. We may put it this way: The concept of knowledge is valuable because it allows us to identify and share reliable information. But why is *knowledge* valuable? That question remains to be answered.

1. Why is there a problem?

We have seen that Socrates raises a question, but why is answering the question a problem? Why can't we say, for example, that knowledge is a kind of information, and that knowledge is valuable because information is valuable? Here I am understanding the concept of information to be "factive": to be information is to be true information. The present suggestion, then, is that knowledge is valuable because true information is valuable. For example, true information has practical value—it helps us to get things that we want.

Socrates rejects this kind of answer because we think that knowledge is more valuable than *mere* true information, or true information that is not knowledge. In an often cited passage from the *Meno*, Socrates points out that mere true belief seems to have the same practical value as knowledge—the man who truly believes that the road leads to Lariisa is as well served as the man who knows that it does. The problem then is this: We think that knowledge has value over and above its practical value as useful information. How do we explain that extra value? This is something that a good theory of knowledge should do.

2. A special problem for reliabilism?

The value question is ancient, and as we have described it, it is a problem for any theory of knowledge whatsoever. Recently, however, Linda Zagzebski has argued that the problem is especially difficult for reliabilism. In her terminology, reliabilism can't explain the added value that knowledge has over true belief. This is because reliabilists conceive the difference between true belief that is knowledge and true belief that falls

short of knowledge as a difference in the reliability of the source. But the reliability of a source, Zagzebski argues, cannot add value to its product. To make the point she draws an analogy to good espresso. The value of a good cup of espresso is not increased by the fact that it was made by a reliable espresso machine. Good espresso is valuable, and reliable espresso machines are valuable. But the value of the espresso is not increased by the value of its source. Consider: a cup of espresso with the same intrinsic qualities, but made by an unreliable machine, would have exactly the same value. The conclusion that Zagzebski draws is that simple reliabilism cannot solve the value problem for knowledge. If knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, its value must be explained in some other way.

3. A problem for everyone.

Kvanvig, however, argues that the value problem is even more intractable. According to Kvanvig, “We are left . . . with no decent answer to the question of the value of knowledge. . . . [T]here is no good answer to the problem of the *Meno*.” (184) Kvanvig’s conclusion, it should be noted, depends on particular ways in which he conceives the problem. We have already seen that the question of the value of knowledge has a tendency to shift. For example, it shifts in Plato’s discussion from “Why is knowledge valuable?” to “Why is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief.” We will see that the question shifts again, and a number of times, in Kvanvig’s discussion as well. For example, at times Kvanvig wants an explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than any of its proper parts. Even more strongly, he sometimes asks why knowledge is more valuable than the sum of its parts. Clearly, each

question in this series requires an increasingly demanding solution to the value problem.

In this chapter I will defend two theses. The first is that some of Kvanvig's formulations of the value problem are too demanding. That is, we should not expect an answer to each of his questions, since we should not expect that knowledge really is valuable in the ways that his questions suppose. For example, and most obviously, there is no pre-theoretic reason for thinking that knowledge is more valuable than the sum of its parts. The second thesis I will defend is that, nevertheless, a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge answers all of Kvanvig's questions. In other words, a virtue-theoretic approach solves each of his formulations of the value problem. Putting these two theses together, we get the following result: A virtue theory gives us a better answer to the value problem than anyone should expect!

3. Shifting questions.

Consider again Kvanvig's two criteria for an adequate theory of knowledge: any such theory, he says, ought to give an account both of the nature of knowledge and the value of knowledge. Suppose that the question about the value of knowledge is the very general one: Why is knowledge valuable? The idea that a theory of knowledge ought to answer this question seems right, and precisely because we are confident that knowledge is indeed valuable. It is a reasonable criterion of success, therefore, that a theory preserves this pre-theoretical data and explains it.

As Kvanvig, notes, however, Socrates's question soon shifts to a more specific one: Why is knowledge more valuable than true opinion? But once again, the demand for an answer seems appropriate. And once again, this is because we are pre-theoretically

confident that knowledge has such a value. As Kvanvig writes,

part of the challenge of explaining the value of knowledge is in explaining how it has more value than other things, one of these other things being true opinion—as Meno claims after acquiescing to Socrates’ point that true belief is every bit as useful as knowledge. . . . Meno expresses here a common presupposition about knowledge, one that is widely, if not universally, shared. Given this presupposition, an account of the value of knowledge must explain more than how knowledge is valuable. It must also explain why the value of knowledge is superior to the value of true opinion. (pp. 3-4)

But now consider a second shift in Kvanvig’s question about the value of knowledge. At another point in the book Kvanvig writes,

To explain the value of knowledge in a way that satisfies the constraints of the *Meno* requires showing that knowledge is more valuable than any proper subset of its constituents. (107)

This new and stronger demand is illustrated by what Kvanvig says about a widespread position in epistemology—that knowledge is composed of justified true belief, plus some further condition to handle Gettier cases.

An adequate account of the value of knowledge must explain why it is more valuable than any subset of its constituents. If we assume that there is some property like justification that distinguishes knowledge from true belief, then an adequate explanation of the value of knowledge could be achieved by giving an adequate account of the value of justification. Because knowledge is more than justified true belief, such an explanation is only one part of a complete explanation. In addition, what is needed is an explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than justified true belief. (112)

Finally, consider one more passage along the same lines.

The conclusion to which our investigation seems to be pointing is that ordinary thinking about knowledge is mistaken, that knowledge does not have the kind of value it is ordinarily thought to have. In particular, we seem to be heading for the conclusion that knowledge does not have a value that exceeds that of subsets of its constituents. (157)

Is it true what Kvanvig is implying here? In other words, is it true that “ordinary thinking” assumes that knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its constituents? That is far from clear. To illustrate, suppose that some JTB+ account of knowledge is correct—that knowledge is justified true belief plus something further to handle Gettier

problems. Suppose also that the “plus” part amounts to some minor, technical adjustment to the traditional idea that knowledge is justified true belief, and that this further condition adds no further value to knowledge over justified true belief. Would these suppositions conflict with ordinary thought? Would this show “that knowledge does not have the kind of value it is ordinarily thought to have”? It is hard to see how that could be the case. Most people are not at all aware of Gettier problems, and we can suppose that virtually no one was before 1963. But then how could ordinary thought include the idea that knowledge is more valuable than justified true belief?

Kvanvig might reply that ordinary thinking does include the idea implicitly. For once ordinary thinkers are exposed to Gettier problems, they quickly agree that knowledge is not equivalent to justified true belief. But that reply does not address the issue at hand, which is whether ordinary thinkers assume that knowledge is more *valuable* than justified true belief. Put more generally, the issue is whether ordinary thinkers assume that knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its constituents, whether this is understood in terms of the JTB+ account or in terms of some other account. And this is what I am saying is dubious. Ordinary thinking, I am suggesting, contains no convictions about that issue.

And now the point is this: If there is no pre-theoretical conviction that knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its constituents, then Kvanvig has placed an inappropriate demand on a solution to the value problem. The original demand to explain the value of knowledge was grounded in an ordinary and widespread conviction that knowledge is indeed valuable. That is why we accepted it as an appropriate criterion for an adequate account of knowledge. When the question about value shifts in the way that

it has by this point in Kvanvig's discussion, the stronger demand on an explanation that emerges is not so grounded.

To sum up, there is no pre-theoretical conviction that knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its constituents, and therefore it is not appropriate to require that a theory of knowledge explain why knowledge has that sort of value. Kvanvig's criterion for an adequate solution to the value problem is too strong.

That being said, in some places Kvanvig seems to place even stronger demands on a solution to the value problem. Specifically, he seems to demand that a solution explain how the value of knowledge exceeds the value of *all its parts together*. Consider the following passages.

. . . 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. (xiv)

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 Plato in the *Meno*. (xv-xvi)

On the assumption we have been making in the past several chapters (that the value of knowledge is in some way a function of the value of its parts), the need to account for both the nature and value of knowledge requires

that we identify a fourth condition that not only yields a counterexample-free account of knowledge but also provides some basis for explaining the value of knowledge over the value of its constituents. (116)

There are aspects of Kvanvig's discussion that suggest that these latest passages are slips—that his considered position is to require only an explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than its *proper* parts. Nevertheless, it will be useful to explore the cogency of this newest demand on a solution to the value problem.

Someone might think that the demand is not even coherent. Consider, for example, an account of bachelorhood. Let us say that a bachelor is an unmarried male who is eligible for marriage. Now suppose we wanted a solution to “the value problem for bachelorhood.” That is, suppose we want an account of why bachelorhood is valuable. Is it appropriate to demand that such an account explain why the value of bachelorhood exceeds the value of all its parts together? It can seem that this demand is not even coherent, for being a bachelor just *is* being an unmarried male who is eligible for marriage. But then how could the value of the former exceed the value of the latter?

We can take the question another way, however. For we can ask whether the value of being a bachelor exceeds the sum of the value of the parts. That is, we can ask whether the value of bachelorhood exceeds the value of being unmarried plus the value of being male plus the value of being eligible for marriage. We might answer in the negative, but the question is at least coherent. That is, at least sometimes the whole is worth more than the parts taken separately.

That is the way that we should understand the latest formulation of the value problem.

It asks whether the value of knowledge exceeds the value of each of its parts taken alone. This would be the case if knowledge were some sort of organic whole, in the sense that its parts are organized in a particular way. Perhaps some relation among the parts adds value beyond that which the parts have of themselves.

The question is coherent, I take it, but there is no pre-theoretical reason for thinking that it should get a positive answer. And as such, it would be inappropriate to place such a demand on a solution to the value problem. Put another way, there is no pre-theoretical reason to think that knowledge is more valuable than its parts taken separately, and therefore no reason to expect that a solution to the value problem will explain why it is.

4. A solution to the value problem.

There is no reason to expect such an explanation. However, I want to argue, a virtue-theoretic approach to the value problem gives us one. In this section I will articulate a solution to the value problem that is consistent with the account of knowledge that I have been defending so far. In fact, we will see, the solution falls out of the account straightforwardly. In the next section I will argue that the account satisfies all of Kvanvig's demands for an adequate solution—even the ones that are unreasonable.

We have been working with the idea that knowledge is a kind of success through virtue. Put another way, knowledge is a kind of success through virtuous agency. The intellectual virtues that give rise to knowledge are best understood as intellectual abilities, and therefore knowledge is a kind of success through one's own abilities. This sort of success, we have seen, can be juxtaposed to mere lucky success: When S has knowledge, S gets things right as the result of her own abilities, as opposed to getting things right as

the result of blind chance or dumb luck, or something else. Put yet another way, in case of knowledge S gets things right *because* she is intellectually able and because she has exercised her abilities.

But now an answer to the value problem falls out of this account straight away. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes a distinction between a) achieving some end by luck or accident, and b) achieving the end through the exercise of one's abilities (or virtues). It is only the latter kind of action, Aristotle argues, that is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing. "Human good," he writes, "turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence."ⁱ In this discussion Aristotle is clearly concerned with intellectual virtue as well as moral virtue: his position is that the successful exercise of one's intellectual virtues is both intrinsically good and constitutive of human flourishing.

If this is correct then there is a clear difference in value between knowledge and mere true belief. In cases of knowledge, we achieve the truth through the exercise of our own intellectual abilities, which are a kind of intellectual virtue. Moreover, we can extend the point to include other kinds of intellectual virtue as well. It is plausible, for example, that the successful exercise of intellectual courage is also intrinsically good, and also constitutive of the best intellectual life. And of course there is a long tradition that says the same about wisdom and the same about understanding. On the view that results, there are a plurality of intellectual virtues, and their successful exercise gives rise to a plurality of epistemic goods. The best intellectual life-- intellectual flourishing, so to speak-- is rich with all of these.ⁱⁱ

5. Kvanvig demands.

We saw that Kvanvig places a series of increasing demands on an adequate solution to the value problem. These demands can be understood in terms of the series of questions articulated above. In effect, each demand is a requirement that one of the following questions be answered:

- A. Why is knowledge valuable?
- B. Why is knowledge more valuable than true belief?
- C. Why is knowledge more valuable than any subset of its constituents?
- D. Why is knowledge more valuable than the value of all its parts taken separately?

Finally, we may note that each question in the series, and each requirement that the question be answered, involves a supposition: that knowledge *is* valuable in the way to be explained.

We may now see that the solution proposed respects all the suppositions and answers all the questions. The answer to questions A and B is straightforward: knowledge is a kind of success through virtue, and in general success through virtue is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing, which is also intrinsically valuable. Therefore, knowledge has value over and above the practical value of true belief.

The proposed solution answers question C as well. Knowledge is a kind of success through virtue. And in general, success through virtue is more valuable than either success without virtue or virtue without success. In particular, virtuously produced true belief is more valuable than true belief that is not virtuous and virtuous belief that is not

true. Neither subset is intrinsically valuable, or constitutive of what is intrinsically valuable, in just the way that knowledge is.

Finally, the proposed solution answers even question D, respecting the supposition that knowledge is more valuable than all of its parts taken together. This is because success through virtue is more valuable than an act that is both successful and virtuous, but not successful because virtuous. Suppose, for example, that an athlete runs a race in a way that is clearly an exercise of her athletic excellence. Suppose also that she wins, but only because the other runners, some of who are equally excellent, get sick before the race. Or suppose that she wins, but only because the other runners were bribed. Clearly, neither sort of win is as valuable as it could be. What one really values as an athlete is to win as the result of ability.

Likewise in the case of intellectual virtue. We saw in Chapter Seven that a belief can be virtuously formed and true, but not true because virtuously formed. This is just the structure of Gettier cases, where true and virtuous belief falls short of knowledge.

It is apparent, then, that a virtue-theoretic approach to the value problem meets all the demands the Kvanvig requires of an adequate solution. So why is Kvanvig dissatisfied with this kind of solution? I can only speculate that it is because he misses the force of the proposal. For example, when he first introduces the virtue-theoretic approach he writes,

Recently, several epistemologists have proposed such an idea, to the effect that credit accrues to the agent who has intellectually virtuous beliefs. . . .

All three share a common theme about the value of the virtues, for they think of this value in term of some kind of credit due to the agent whose belief is virtue-based. (81)

Just as actions that result from virtues yield credit for the actor, beliefs resulting from faculties that count as virtues generate credit for the believer. . . . (82)

Notice that there is no mention here of *success* through virtue. The central idea of the proposal, which is that knowledge is valuable because it is a kind of success through ability or virtue, is entirely absent.

Even when Kvanvig talks about true virtuous belief, he seems to miss the distinction between a) a belief's being true and virtuously formed, and b) a belief's being true because virtuously formed. At places Kvanvig does seem aware of the distinction. For example, he quotes Sosa as follows:

The grasping of the truth central to truth-connected reliabilist epistemology is not just the truth that may be visited upon our beliefs by happenstance or external agency. We desire rather truth gained through our own performances, and this seems a reflectively defensible desire for a good preferable not just extrinsically but intrinsically. What we prefer is the deed of true believing, where not only the believing but also its truth is

attributable to the agent as his or her own doing. (Sosa, “The Place of Truth in Epistemology,” in DePaul and Zagzebski. Quoted on p. 95)

But when Kvanvig describes the view in question, he says this:

The basic idea of a virtue approach to the value of knowledge over that of its subparts is that there is a special value for beliefs that arise out of intellectual virtue. When true belief is a product of the virtues, the claim is that there is epistemic credit due to the agent in question and hence that virtuous true belief is more valuable than true belief. (106)

In the first sentence he refers to the special value of “beliefs that arise out of intellectual virtue,” whereas in the second sentence he says that credit is due when “true belief is a product of the virtues.” It isn’t clear that he sees the importance of the distinction, and so it isn’t clear whether the phrase “virtuous true belief” in the second sentence means a) belief that is both true and virtuous, or b) belief that is true because virtuous.

In the following passage, however, it seems clear that Kvanvig is missing the distinction.

It is equally true, however, that knowledge is more than intellectually true virtuous belief. Goldman’s fake barn case discussed earlier is a well-known example that reveals a difference between knowledge and such virtuous belief, for impressive perceptual abilities count as intellectual

virtues and could be displayed in the fake barn case. The reason the display of such virtues falls short of knowledge is that perception can be an impressive ability and still be unable to distinguish real barns from well-designed fake ones, and so a true belief could result that still was only accidentally true. (107)

Kvanvig's claim in the last sentence is problematic for independent reasons. That is, it is unclear how perception can count as an ability relative to S's environment and yet be unable to distinguish real barns from fake ones. But suppose we agree for the sake of argument that S's belief is not only true but also formed from a virtue. Still, the belief is not true *because* it is formed from a virtue. Put more carefully, the belief's being so formed does not explain why S has a true belief rather than a false belief. On the contrary, S believes the truth because she happens (accidentally) to be looking at the one real barn in the area. If she had been looking anywhere else nearby, excellent perception or no, she would have a false belief.

The example, then, ignores the distinction between belief that is true and virtuous, and belief that is true because virtuous. But as we have seen, it is just this distinction that is crucial to the proposed solution.

ⁱ Nicomachean Ethics, I.7.

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to many people for their comments on earlier versions of this material, including Robert Audi, Stephen Grimm, and Wayne Riggs. I would especially like to thank Ernest Sosa and Linda Zagzebski for many discussions on relevant topics.