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Epistemic Goals and Epistemic Values

The truth exerts a powerful attraction. Reading the newspaper over breakfast a few months ago, for example, I came across the following quote from Ricky Williams, a running back for the Miami Dolphins who was in the process of walking away from his million-dollar salary to pursue a career in holistic medicine. “I’m going to search for the truth,” Williams said. “Everything I’m doing in my life is about finding the truth.” And naturally, Williams is only among the latest in a long line of thinkers who have been passionate about pursuing the truth. Socrates, for instance, could think of no greater compliment to pay his dialogue partners than that they entered the discussion only for the sake of truth. And when Socrates lost his patience with someone, it was almost always because they placed more importance in protecting their reputation, or in impressing the crowd, than in finding the truth for its own sake.

There are a variety of conclusions that epistemologists are tempted to draw from such examples. That truth is the goal of inquiry, for example. Or that truth has an intrinsic or standing value for us, insofar as we are cognitive agents. Or even that truth is the *only* thing, from an epistemic point of view, that has an intrinsic or standing value.

These apparently straightforward conclusions lead to a number of significant worries, however. For example, if we say that truth is the only intrinsically valuable thing from an epistemic point of view, then why do we think that knowledge is better than mere true belief, or that a justified true belief is better or more valuable than an unjustified true belief?¹ A

¹ A justified true belief that it is raining is not *more* true than an unjustified true belief (a lucky guess, for example) that it is raining, so why do we take the former to be more valuable than the latter? For more on

justified true belief that it is raining is not *more* true than an unjustified true belief (a lucky guess, for example) that it is raining, so why do we take the former to be more valuable than the latter? Or again, if we think that pursuing the truth is intrinsically valuable, then why are we unapologetically indifferent to so many truths? If you propose an evening memorizing the phone book for Topeka, Kansas, and I decline, have I really missed an opportunity to enrich myself, from an epistemic point of view? If the truth is always intrinsically worth pursuing, then it seems that I have. And yet that conclusion seems ridiculous.

In this paper I will sketch an approach to epistemic value that suggests a way around these problems, a sketch that attempts to make sense of the value of truth in our epistemic lives. In the final section I will then consider how this account sheds a different light on the nature of epistemic appraisal in general.

1. Truth for Its Own Sake

Our interest in finding out how things stand with respect to a particular subject—of finding out the *truth* with respect to that subject—is often motivated by our practical goals. If one of my practical goals is to board the next flight to Chicago, for example, I will be interested in finding out when my flight is leaving and where the plane is docked. Or again, if one of my practical goals is to get the best deal on a new camera, I will be interested in comparing prices with respect to the stores in my area, searching the web for customer reviews, and so on.

Practical goals aside, however, we also seem to have a purely *epistemic* or *intellectual* interest in finding the truth. Thus as Carl Hempel points out in the opening paragraph of his “Aspects of Scientific Explanation,” in addition to the obvious practical incentives we have for wanting to understand our environment, we also seem to have a distinctively intellectual

the so-called “value problem” in epistemology see, for example, DePaul (1993, 2001), Zagzebski (2003), Sosa (2003), and Pritchard (forthcoming).

desire to make sense of the world, a desire rooted in our “sheer intellectual curiosity, in [our] deep and persistent desire to know and to understand [ourselves] and [our] world. So strong, indeed, is this urge that in the absence of more reliable knowledge, myths are often invoked to fill the gap” (1965, p. 333). Along with Hempel, Alvin Goldman likewise points to the non-instrumental or intrinsic value that we often associate with acquiring the truth. According to Goldman:

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 or practical ends. (1986, p. 98)

In later work Goldman (1999, 2002) goes further: not only is truth acquisition intrinsically valuable, but on his view truth acquisition is the *only* thing that is intrinsically valuable, from an epistemic point of view. Thus he argues that although there are a variety of traits that we value from an epistemic point of view—having beliefs that are justified, for example, or that are rational—all of these other traits are valuable only insofar as they tend to lead us to the truth.

Goldman’s view raises important issues about the nature of epistemic appraisal that I will take up again towards the end of the paper. For the moment, however, it will help to take a step back and ask a more basic question: namely, why think that we have this interest in the truth for its own sake in the first place? In other words, why think that acquiring the truth has a more than merely instrumental value for us?

In the passage quoted earlier, Hempel offers us an important clue, I think, when he appeals to our natural *curiosity* to make sense of the intrinsic value that we often associate with acquiring the truth. Goldman too, in his later *Knowledge in a Social World*, makes the appeal to curiosity explicit:

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. We also seek knowledge for practical reasons, as when we solicit a physician's diagnosis or compare prices at automobile dealerships. (1999, p. 3)³

According to both Hempel and Goldman, then, 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.

According to this way of thinking, our curiosity about how things stand in the world is therefore importantly like the thirst we (characteristically, at least) feel when our body is dehydrated. When our body is dehydrated—when we experience thirst—*satisfying* our thirst is naturally thought to possess a kind of intrinsic value: it seems to be a good in its own right, quite apart from whatever further contributions it might make to our well-being. The fact that we are thirsty, moreover, seems to provide us with a standing or *pro tanto* reason to satisfy our thirst, a reason that holds in virtue of the intrinsic value that comes from satisfying our thirst. Of course, that is not to say that satisfying our thirst does not importantly contribute to our broader well-being; in satisfying our thirst (poisons aside) we replenish our body in a way that helps us to perform our everyday tasks. The point is simply that satisfying our thirst seems to have value in its own right, over and above these other contributions.⁵

³ Richard Foley (1987, p. 11), Marian David (2005b, p. 302), and William Alston (2005, p. 31) all likewise draw a connection between our natural curiosity and the intrinsic value we place in attaining the truth.

⁵ It should also be obvious that the standing or *pro tanto* value that comes from satisfying our thirst is capable of being overridden. If I am thirsty but drinkless and I see that you are holding a refreshing looking drink, I have some reason to want to satisfying my thirst by taking your drink and consuming it—a reason, however, that is easily trumped by the stronger reason I have not simply to take your drink.

But if curiosity is like thirst in this respect, in another respect it is interestingly different—and to my mind this is where a certain highly seductive, yet also finally flawed, way of thinking about the value of truth gets its footing. For, after all, what does it mean to be curious? Fundamentally, it seems, two things. First, as we have seen, because we are curious we desire the truth for its own sake. But second, and unlike the thirst we feel when we are dehydrated, our curiosity-driven desire for the truth seems open-ended or unrestricted. From the point of view of our natural curiosity, in other words, finding out the truth with respect to *any* subject would seem to be worthy of our interest. John Stuart Mill, for one, nicely illustrates this unrestricted spirit in *Utilitarianism*:

A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it: in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind, past and present, and their prospects for the future. ([1861] 2001, p. 14)

Since Mill does not place a limit on his “all that surrounds it” claim, he seems to imply that his list of topics is representative rather than exhaustive. A curious mind, a cultivated mind, finds an interest in how things stand, without exception, or in everything that is the case, without limit.

It is because this conclusion seems so seductive, I suggest, that the following deeply important question seems so naïve: namely, what is it about a given truth—or better, about a given subject—in virtue of which it sparks our curiosity? The question seems naïve because it looks like at this point we already *have* an answer: a given subject sparks our curiosity because it holds the promise of truth, and as curious beings we want the truth. There is not something in addition to the truth that we want, or that explains why we want certain truths. After all, we’ve already said that insofar as we are curious we want the truth as such, the truth for its own sake.

In the following sections I will try to explain why this question isn't so naïve after all, but perhaps the best way to illustrate the need for asking the question is first to consider examples of theorists who seem explicitly to embrace the seductive way of thinking just described. Thus according to Jonathan Kvanvig:

[W]e do have an interest in the truth, both pragmatic and purely intellectual. It is the nature of interests to lack specificity: We do not have an individuated interest in the truth of the claim that our mothers love us, that the president is not a crook, that Wyoming is north of Mexico, and so on. What we have is a general interest in the truth, and that interest attaches to particular truths in the manner of instantiation in predicate logic. The default position for any truth is that our general interest in the truth applies to it, though, of course, there can be special circumstances involved so that the general interest in the truth is overridden by other factors. (2003, p. 41)

And according to Michael Lynch:

Without a doubt, there are all sorts of true beliefs that are not worth having, all things considered. But the fact that I should not bother with those sorts of beliefs doesn't mean that it isn't still *prima facie* good to believe even the most trivial truth. (2004, p. 55)

Although Kvanvig and Lynch do not directly appeal to the role of curiosity in these passages, in other places in their work they too appeal to our natural curiosity to explain the general value we place in finding the truth.⁶ For again, it seems, it is a hallmark of our curiosity that we are interested in the truth not for practical purposes but rather for its own sake.

Moreover, it seems to be a hallmark of our curiosity that we are interested in the truth in an open-ended way; as Mill suggests, a truly curious person seems to have a desire to learn about *anything*. Borrowing from Lynch's own formulation (Lynch 2005, p. 331), we can therefore think of Kvanvig and Lynch as endorsing the following *Prima Facie Good Principle* (PFGP) with respect to truth:

⁶ Thus Kvanvig later offers an extended defense of the idea of "the goal of curiosity is to find the truth" (2003, p. 145), and elsewhere in his book Lynch too makes the link explicit: "We care about the truth for more than just the benefits it brings us.... There are times in our lives when we simply want to know for no other reason than the knowing itself. *Curiosity* is not always motivated by practical concerns" (2004, pp. 15-16; emphasis added).

PFGP: It is *prima facie* good, for all p (to believe that p if and only if it is true that p).^{7,8}

Of course, Kvanvig and Lynch are realistic. They acknowledge that our interest in acquiring particular truths can be overridden; the vast majority of the time, for example, it will be more important to pursue truths that promise a practical payoff of some kind. But on their view this does nothing to undercut the standing value that learning any truth holds for us. Were it not for the fact that we are “finite beings” (Kvanvig 2003, p. 41)—had we world enough and time, as it were—we would apparently be able to exercise our curiosity in its purest form and pursue the truth in any entirely unrestricted way.

2. Curiosity

But why think that? Specifically, why think that, in virtue of our curiosity, it is attaining the truth *per se*, or finding out how things stand with respect to *any* subject, that has a standing value for us? Cases along the following lines might be thought to lend support to this idea. Suppose, for example, that as you sit down at a desk in the library you notice a piece of paper turned face down on the upper right corner of the desk. Naturally, you turn the piece of paper over and take a look at it. Why? The answer seems obvious: you’re just curious! Or again, suppose you’re wandering just below the crest of an unfamiliar hill. Many of us, perhaps not so many as would turn over the paper, but many nonetheless, will naturally be interested in what lies beyond the crest of the hill. Why? Again, because we’re just

⁷ Horwich’s (2006) principle “VT” (for “the value of truth”) seems to say much the same thing; in Horwich’s words, “It is desirable to believe what is true and only what is true” (p. 347).

⁸ To be clear: I do not mean to attribute PFGP to all the figures discussed so far (e.g., Goldman and Hempel), but rather simply to Kvanvig and Lynch (and possibly Horwich). It should also be noted that Lynch’s position on the value of truth is nuanced. While he claims that believing the truth is always a *prima facie* good, he stops short of saying that believing the truth has intrinsic value. His preferred way of making sense of the standing value that believing the truth seems to have—namely, as a good always worth realizing or promoting—is instead in terms of the language of a “constitutive value,” where believing the truth is an essential, constitutive part of a flourishing human life, which on Lynch’s view is intrinsically value (see Lynch 2004, pp. 127-28). As Lynch notes, however, the notion of a constitutive value is theoretically quite similar to the notion of an intrinsic value: “Being constitutively good, like being an intrinsic good, makes something worth caring about for its own sake, as opposed to caring about it for what it leads to” (2004, p. 128).

curious! Even when there is no obvious practical benefit that attaches to these actions, we seem to be driven by a fundamental desire to find out how things stand.

This all seems to move too fast, however. When we turn over the piece of paper, for instance, what is it, really, that drives us? Why does *this* particular subject spark our curiosity? On the view just considered, this subject sparks our curiosity because finding out how things stand in general—in other words, finding out how things stand with respect to any subject—sparks our curiosity. Or, as Kvanvig might put it, *this* is interesting because the truth in general is interesting, and this is an instance of the truth. But this explanation matches the facts quite poorly. If it were truth *simpliciter* that attracted our curiosity, then why does our interest focus on the piece of paper rather than on the countless other truths within easy reach? Suppose there are presently 53 motes of dust on the desk (cf. Sosa 2003). Why not spend the next few minutes counting *them*? For that matter, why even focus on one's immediate surroundings at all? Assuming you have a healthy stock of beliefs, why not just start conjoining them with one another? Or disjoining individual beliefs with any random proposition? The number of potential truths within easy reach quickly begins to look stunningly large (cf. David 2001, p. 159; 2005a, pp. 297-98).

But if it does not seem to be my general interest in the truth that explains my interest in the paper, then what is it? Why is learning the truth about *this* subject worth pursuing? A natural answer—or at least an answer worth serious consideration—is that there is something else, apart from the simple opportunity to acquire another truth, that explains the worthwhileness of this subject. Perhaps, for example, my interest in finding out how things stand with respect to the paper can be explained by the general value I place in the well-being of others: someone may have left this behind, I think, and if so perhaps I can help them recover it. Sadly but more likely, it can be explained by the standing value I place in finding out other people's business, combined with my sense that this paper holds the promise of

such information. All of this is to emphasize, however, that finding out how things stand with respect to the paper is not valuable just insofar as it represents a new truth to be acquired. Instead, finding out how things stand with respect to the paper promises to lead to other things we value: for example, the value we place in altruistic acts or voyeuristic discoveries.

To this Kvanvig and Lynch might respond that while these additional values might explain the particular *salience* of finding out how things stand with respect to the piece of paper, that does not in itself tell against the value that the subject had all by itself, simply in virtue of its promise of truth. Adding extra value to a subject will help it to stand out from the crowd of subjects with this promise, but that is not to say that from an epistemic point of view it was not the truth *per se* that we found worth pursuing. What's more, it is in this sense that counting the motes of dust on the desk can claim the same standing value, from an epistemic point of view. Again, the idea would be that, had we world enough and time, we would realize that these truths too were valuable and worth learning—but as things stand our other interests tend to crowd out our purely epistemic interests.

This still seems very difficult to accept, however. Suppose we take away my finitude, at least in the sense of making me immortal. If at some point counting the motes of dust on my desk seemed worth doing from a purely intellectual point of view, then I can only conclude with Bernard Williams (1976) that immortality would be a tedious and dreary prospect indeed, and *itself* not worth having.⁹ When the only data we have to go by tells us

⁹ One point that might give us pause here, as Marian David points out (2005b, p. 299), is that theists typically attribute *omniscience* to God, which suggests that believing all truths is a kind of ideal state, hence (perhaps) an intrinsically desirable one. One point to note in response is that being good for or perfective of God and being good for or perfective of us are presumably quite different things: for example, being *simple*, in the sense of not being complex, is classically thought to be good for or perfective of God; being simple would be quite disastrous for us, though. (For more on this see David 2005a, p. 298.) I was also once told that according to certain medieval Islamic philosophers, God's knowledge (his omniscience, if you will) extended only to important or noble truths; other truths (or, better, other topics) were in some way beneath his dignity. I have not been able to track down a source for this claim myself, but for our purposes it is enough to note that it does not seem like an absurd position for theists to take—mainly because of our sense that intellectual flourishing or well-being comes from pursuing more “important” truths, however that is to be understood.

that there is nothing intrinsically worthwhile at all about counting motes of dust (or memorizing phone books, or disjoining our beliefs with any random proposition), then we should take these data at face value and look for a better way to explain our interest in the truth.¹⁰

3. A New Start

Clearly, we have gone off course somewhere. Remember that we began with the Hempel-Goldman observation that from a purely intellectual point of view we are often interested in learning the truth as-such, or for its own sake. This then spun off into various claims about value. Most importantly, that the reason why we desire truth for its own sake is because acquiring the truth *per se* has a standing value for us, a standing value that seems to be traceable to our natural curiosity. But it doesn't take much argument to show that finding out how things stand with respect to countless subjects seems to possess no intrinsic epistemic value at all.

We need to find a new approach, then, one that makes sense of two of our earlier results: first, that as intellectual beings we often desire the truth intrinsically or for its own sake; and second, that even those of us with a passably cultivated mind seem indifferent to countless truths.

To get a better sense of how to move beyond this impasse, it will help to consider a roughly analogous situation, one where we likewise start with an end that we seem to desire for its own sake, yet where it likewise seems to make sense to ask further, explanatory questions about why the end has this status. So, for example, suppose that:

[1] Reading *Don Quixote* is something I desire for its own sake.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that I don't mean to endorse a principle here along the lines of "If X does not seem intrinsically valuable, then X is not intrinsically valuable." The claim is only that the utter lack of appeal we find in the prospect of learning (say) that there are such-and-such motes of dust on the desk, even when we are thinking solely about our distinctively epistemic or intellectual well-being, is the best evidence we have that finding out how things stand with respect to such subjects is not worth doing for its own sake.

Why think [1]? Well, among other things, the goal of reading *Don Quixote* seems to be something for the sake of which I do many other things. For example, it is something for the sake of which I will go to the bookstore and buy it, clear away my evenings so that I might have free time, and so on. Moreover, it is certainly conceivable that in reading it I might have no other practical goal in mind: no literature course to prepare for, no friends I hope to impress at cocktail parties, and so on.

All that said, however, a number of questions still seem perfectly sensible. For instance: Why is reading *Don Quixote* something that I desire for its own sake? Why is it something I find worth doing? On the Kvanvig-Lynch model considered in the previous section, the answer might seem to be because:

[2] Reading [anything] is something that has a standing value for me.

But, patently, [2] is false: reading anything does *not* have a standing value for me. Reading Paris Hilton's *Confessions of an Heiress*, for instance, is not something that I find worth doing, nor is reading the fine print of the latest Sears catalogue. And by this I mean that reading the fine print in the latest Sears catalogue does not even have *pro tanto* value for me; it is not the kind of thing which has some weight, and which happens to be outweighed by other things I value.¹¹

Then what is it about the reading of *Don Quixote* that makes it something I desire for its own sake? I'm sure there are many sophisticated ways of answering this question, but a commonplace answer will do: so let us simply say, crudely, that reading *Don Quixote* has this standing value for me because it is very funny and poignant. The reading of *Don Quixote* is valuable, therefore, not because it is an instance of reading but rather *because of* these other

¹¹ Embarrassingly, that's probably not quite right with respect to the Paris Hilton memoir: acquiring gossip information about celebrities does seem to have at least *some* standing value for me. So perhaps it would be better to stick with the Sears catalogue.

features. Provisionally, we can therefore say that the proper explanation for [1] is something along the lines of

[3] Reading [very funny, poignant things] is something that has a standing value for me.

So we might say: some reading is worth pursuing for its own sake, but the explanation as to why it is worth pursuing for its own sake does not appeal primarily to the fact that it is an instance of reading but rather to these other features.¹²

If this rough analogy is apt, at any rate, it suggests a way around the impasse identified earlier. Specifically, it suggests a way to reconcile the fact that (a) from an epistemic point of view, attaining the truth often seems intrinsically valuable, and hence worth pursuing for its own sake, with the fact that (b) countless truths seem flatly indifferent to us, considered from an epistemic point of view. For if the *Don Quixote* comparison is apt, then even if we acknowledge truth as a goal worth pursuing for its own sake, there is still a significant explanatory question to be asked: namely, what is it, in virtue of which, attaining certain truths is desirable for its own sake? Or better, why is finding out how things stand with respect to certain subjects worth pursuing while others are not?

4. Questions and Types of Curiosity

Let us suppose provisionally, then, that the value of particular truths can be accounted for in a similar way. In other words, let us suppose that there is some way to fill in the brackets along the lines of [3], so we can acknowledge that it is often the truth as such that we want, rather than the truth for some particular purpose, while also acknowledging that these truths might have their value at least in part in virtue of possessing other features.

¹² By the same token, it should be pointed out, the reading of the fine print in the Sears catalogue, although it has no standing value for me, can certainly *become* valuable (worth doing) in light of the other goals and desires I might acquire. For example, if I have ordered some tools from Sears and I want to return them, the fine print is where I want to go if I want to find out how things stand with respect the Sears return policy. The reading is then valuable—or, more exactly, the acquiring of this information—is then valuable in light of my other goals and desires.

The outstanding question then is this: what are these additional features, in virtue of which certain truths are interesting? I think this question can be answered most fruitfully if we re-orient it a little. In particular, rather than asking “What is it that makes certain *truths* interesting?,” I suggest we would be better off asking “What is it that makes certain *subjects* or *topics* interesting?” For not only does the former question sound poorly formed, but it seems to get things back to front. What interests us is certain subjects or topics, and what we want to find out is how things stand with respect to these subjects or topics; more briefly, we want to find out the truth with respect to these subjects or topics. But it is the subject or topic that interests us initially, and the truth about the subject or topic that promises to satisfy this interest.

So with respect to those subjects or topics that offer the promise of truth, why are some worth pursuing and others not? Philip Kitcher has recently addressed a question along these lines. As Kitcher points out:

The resolute efforts to ban talk of values from the philosophy of science have obscured the fact that *certain types* of questions arise for us, and we seek explanations that answer these types of questions. (2004, p. 216; original emphasis)

He elaborates this thought as follows:

Thoughtful and perceptive people throughout history have sometimes entertained a question not because the answer would enable them to do something practical, something they couldn't have managed without it, but simply because the question itself fascinated them. When we view a completely pragmatic account of the sciences as inadequate, I think we're responding to this (almost?) universal human sense of curiosity. Our aim... [is] simply to answer the questions that matter to us. (p. 216)

Two suggestions from these passages seem particularly important, one of which we have discussed already: namely, that certain questions interest us *simply* in virtue of our curiosity.

The other suggestion remains to be explored: namely, that the questions or topics that interest us in this way tend to share certain common features—that they belong to certain

types.¹³ Unfortunately, Kitcher's account of the kinds of questions or topics that interest us is rather vague. The questions that pique our curiosity are questions that matter to us, he tells us, and they matter to us in a non-pragmatic way. Though unexceptionable, this doesn't seem to tell us much that we don't already know. Can more be said?

Although to my mind several types of questions are specially tied to our sense of curiosity, we can get a better sense of the distinctive ways in which our curiosity comes into play by focusing on two types in particular. Thus, one important type of question that seems to be specially linked to our sense of curiosity has something like the following form: *Why are things this way rather than that?* A second type of question relates to our interest in human behavior and might be put (again quite crudely) as follows: *What is he/she doing?*¹⁴

In claiming that questions of these types are specially tied to our sense of curiosity what I mean is that finding out the answer to particular instances of these questions holds a standing value for us in a way that finding out the answer to instances of other types of questions does not. Perhaps the clearest way to make this point is by comparing an instance of a "What is he/she doing?" question with an instance of the "phone book" style question discussed earlier. Thus suppose someone sits down next to you at the local coffee shop and proceeds to take out a book. It is very likely that you will be at least mildly interested in what she is reading. If she gets up to leave, you will probably be at least mildly interested in where she is going. And so on. Even if the practical demands of life typically make it impossible for us to pursue questions of this sort, it is plausible to think that, had we world enough and time, we would find an unanswered question of this kind at least modestly worth pursuing.

¹³ 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" (2001, p. 199).

¹⁴ Another type of question that seems to hold a standing interest for us is something along the following lines: "What is this stuff made of?" In other words, with respect to any thing, if we do not know what that thing is made of, we arguably have a standing interest in—alternatively, there is a natural epistemic value associated with—finding out what that thing is made of.

“Phone book” style questions, by contrast, seem to lack this natural connection to our sense of curiosity. It hardly seems to be the case, for example, that, with respect to any phone book, if we happen to be ignorant of the number of the person listed on the top of page 12, we will be at least mildly interested in finding out the number of that person.¹⁵ Although we might *become* interested in finding out how things stand with respect to such a subject—say, if we were to get a job as a typesetter for the local phonebook company—this is not the kind of subject or question that has a standing interest for us. It is not tied, in the way an instance of the question “What is he/she doing?” seems to be tied, to our natural sense of curiosity.

Kitcher seems entirely right, therefore, in claiming that some distinctive types of questions hold a special or standing interest for us, in virtue of our natural curiosity. Other types of questions, moreover, also seem to *lack* this special, curiosity-driven interest. What I now want to suggest, however, is that there is a still further and considerably more important distinction to be drawn among types of questions that seem naturally to elicit our curiosity. More specifically, what I now want to suggest is that some forms of curiosity are driven more by what we might think of as our standing *prudential* needs or concerns, and that some are driven more by our standing *epistemic* needs or concerns. For short, we might think of these two prospective types of curiosity as *prudential curiosity* on the one hand and as *epistemic curiosity* on the other. If we are right in thinking that there is such a distinction to be drawn, moreover, then we need to be even more careful than we originally suspected when we appeal to the idea that there are certain subjects that interest us just “as such” or just “insofar as we are intellectual/curious beings.”

As a first approximation, we can try to capture the distinction as follows: whereas epistemic curiosity essentially responds to our sense of *puzzlement*, prudential curiosity

¹⁵ If, for whatever reason, you find yourself *ever-so-slightly* interested in such information (perhaps because you think it might come in handy later), then imagine something even more banal, such as the type face that the person’s name is written in, or the length in millimeters between each letter in the person’s name, and so on.

responds to some basic prudential concern of ours (such as a concern for survival, etc.), but not in a way that essentially involves a sense of puzzlement. Jonathan Lear, for one, marks a distinction of this kind when he points out that when Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* by claiming “All men by nature desire understanding (*episteme*),” the desire Aristotle appeals to here is fueled more by *puzzlement* than (as it were) “mere” *curiosity* (p. 3). It is worth quoting Lear at length here:

From earliest childhood humans display an innate curiosity. Indeed the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein once called this childhood curiosity *epistemophilia*—love of *episteme*. But curiosity is not, I believe, the best way to conceptualize what drives men on. Perhaps it is better to think of man’s natural capacity to be puzzled. We tend to take this capacity for granted. Yet it is a remarkable fact about us that we cannot simply observe phenomena: we want to know *why* they occur. We can imagine beings who simply watched the sun set and the moon rise in the heavens: they might come to expect regular transitions, but they would lack curiosity as to why the changes occur. We are not like that. The heavenly motions cry out (*to us*) for explanation. (1988, p. 3)

On Lear’s view, then, curiosity seems to have a kind of prudential orientation that distinguishes it from a more purely epistemic or intellectual puzzlement. From our perspective, however, we do have to agree that the kind of puzzlement Lear describes is distinct from our natural curiosity. Instead, I think we can say what Lear, following Aristotle, is correctly pointing to in emphasizing the notion of puzzlement is that there is a distinctive *kind* of curiosity we need to be alert to, a kind linked to our distinctively epistemic interests and concerns rather than to our primarily practical concerns.

Focusing on the notion of puzzlement also helps to show the way in which the two types of questions that we highlighted earlier—on the one hand, “What are things this way rather than that?”¹⁶ and on the other, “What is he/she doing?”—are indeed much more different than we might originally have suspected. For notice: when we are prompted to ask a “Why are things this way rather than that?” question, this is presumably because it seems to

¹⁶ For convenience, in the remainder of the paper I will use a short form of this question: namely, “Why this rather than that?”

us that something about the world might have been otherwise, and we want to find out what it is that accounts for the difference between these alternatives. Thus, for example, when the moon goes through different phases, one day appearing as a sliver and shortly thereafter appearing full, we seem naturally to have an interest in finding out—we seem naturally curious about—what it is that accounts for this difference. Or again, when the tides lapping up on the shore are sometimes high, sometimes low, we seem naturally interested in finding out what it is that accounts for the difference between the high and the low tides.¹⁷

The kind of “What is he/she doing?” curiosity we have with respect to human behavior, by contrast, does not seem to be rooted in the same kind of essentially *epistemic* need.¹⁸ Suppose, for example, we learned that an Alpha Centaurian version of Brian Leiter tracked the faculty movement among Alpha Centaurian universities with as much tenacity as our own Brian Leiter. After the novelty of such a discovery had worn off, I suspect that many of us would not pursue this information with as much natural curiosity (less flatteringly: gossipy interest) as we pursue the information in Prof. Leiter’s reports. And the reason, plausibly, is that the earthly Leiter’s information potentially affects our well-being in a much more obvious way than Alpha Centauri’s Leiter. It would, after all, be a stretch to say that there is anything intrinsically interesting, from an epistemic point of view, about faculty movement; instead, when the subject interests us, it interests us only because of our further practical goals and concerns.

Our interest in satisfying our practical goals and concerns is so deep-seated, however, that it is hardly surprising that topics and questions that are strongly connected to these goals

¹⁷ That is not to say that finding out why things are one way rather than another might not have a practical benefit too (indeed, it typically has a very significant one, because it helps us to gain a kind of practical control over our environment); the point is only that answering questions of this sort seems to inspire, if nothing else, an irreducibly epistemic interest on our part.

¹⁸ Although, of course, it can be. For example, we might also be puzzled by the behavior of someone else (why did they do this rather than that?), and be curious as a result. But notice that this would be to subsume the second case into the first, and turn it into a kind of epistemic interest (or, loosely speaking, a kind of “scientific” interest: where the answer to our question will cite a cause of the difference).

and concerns might appropriately be thought to possess a kind of intrinsic value for us. In other words, it should come as no surprise that we should find ourselves naturally interested in—naturally *curious about*—such topics. The point that I want to emphasize here, however, is that we should not conflate our interest in questions that are tied to our deep-seated practical goals and concerns with our interest in questions that are tied to the distinctively epistemic concerns—as when, for example, we think there are various ways a situation might have been, and we want to find out what it is that accounts for the difference.¹⁹

Once we appreciate the way in which our epistemic curiosity is characteristically elicited, finally, it quickly becomes clear that the number of situations that are capable of eliciting our curiosity in this way (and relative to our background beliefs) is typically enormous. As William Alston points out:

Whenever any claim is made about something other than an explanation, one can seek an explanation of its being so rather than otherwise. We can ask, “Why does this object have this property [rather than some other]?”, “Why did this happen where and when it did [rather than elsewhere and at another time]?”, “Why does this proposition entail that proposition [rather than some other]?”, “Why does this substance weigh more than that one?”, and so on. So explanation is one sort of thing we can seek with respect to any subject matter whatever. (2005, p. 165)²⁰

Indeed, appreciating Alston’s point allows us finally to make sense of something that seems to have been motivating alternative accounts of the value of truth from the beginning: namely, that our epistemic sense of curiosity, of wanting to learn about the world, looks to all the world to be essentially unbounded. We are now in a position to recognize the sense in which this is true. For, as Alston points out, in principle there seems to be no limit to the kind of

¹⁹ In saying that our epistemic curiosity is naturally elicited by such questions, I do not mean to claim that as a matter of record everyone is interested in, or curious about, such things. People might spend their whole lives observing the tides and noticing how they differ from day to day, for instance, and not be interested in what it is that accounts for the difference. Their lives might simply be too consumed with work or sickness or depression to bother. But this is consistent with the claim that these questions have a standing or *pro tanto* value for us, because by their very nature *pro tanto* values are the sorts of things that can be weighed against one another, and thus are capable of being outweighed.

²⁰ In adding the brackets, I have tried to draw out the contrastive (“why this rather than that?”) structure to these questions that Alston calls attention to in the first sentence.

“why this rather than that?” questions that can fascinate us, and apparently fascinate us for their own sake. Alston’s insight also helps to explain why someone might be tempted to think that we have a (standing) interest in finding out how things stand with respect to *any* subject or question. Since the number of “why this rather than that?” questions that can fascinate us seems unlimited, there is a strong tendency to think that any fences one might attempt to draw between types of questions will be artificial. Unlimited curiosity, it is tempting to think, is precisely the kind of thing that can’t be fenced in.

This thought rests on a mistake, however, for as we know from mathematics, there can be *orders* of infinite things. Thus just as there are more natural numbers than there are real numbers, even though there is an infinity of natural numbers, in the same way, I want to suggest, there are more questions out there that hold the promise of answers than there are questions that intrinsically interest us, even though the number of questions that intrinsically interest us seems essentially unlimited.

Summing up, we can now see that appealing to a basic need—most plausibly, a need along the lines of our natural curiosity—to make sense of the intrinsic value that we place in acquiring the truth is shot through with a number of problems. For one thing, we have seen that our curiosity (*simpliciter*, as it were) is naturally elicited only by a particular range of subjects or questions (not by phone-book-style questions, etc.): so the argument that invokes our natural curiosity to explain the intrinsic value we find in acquiring the truth—*any* truth—must have made a wrong turn somewhere. Pushing further, what we found was that even with respect to those subjects that naturally elicit our curiosity, not all such subjects seem connected to the sort of distinctively *epistemic* needs or interests that Goldman and Hempel appealed to at the outset. Instead, the kind of curiosity we naturally feel with respect to many subjects (“Is Professor X *really* going to take this offer?”) seems rooted instead in our practical goals or interests; they hardly seem to be subjects intrinsically worth pursuing, from

a strictly epistemic point of view. In trying, then, to make sense of the sort of curiosity that is distinctively tied to our epistemic goals and concerns we appealed to the sense of puzzlement we naturally feel in response to certain situations. More exactly, we appealed to the puzzlement we feel when we think things could have been otherwise—for it then seems, when confronted with such situations, that we naturally want to know—*we are naturally curious about—why* they are this way rather than that. I then noted, finally, that because this class of “why this rather than that?” questions was essentially inexhaustible, we can accommodate the intuition that our epistemic sense of curiosity likewise seems inexhaustible, without having to accept the flawed conclusion that finding out the truth with respect to any subject is intrinsically worthwhile, from a strictly epistemic point of view. In the next section I will briefly consider how the results of this discussion so far bear on broader issues of epistemic appraisal.

5. Epistemic Appraisal

What I want to suggest in closing is that if our conclusions so far have been on target, then one popular way to think about the nature of epistemic appraisal—call it “the teleological approach” to epistemic appraisal—needs to be reconsidered, and perhaps even abandoned.

According to Alvin Goldman (e.g., 1999, ch. 1; 2002) and William Alston (e.g., 2005), for example, our concepts of epistemic appraisal are *teleologically* oriented because what it means for a belief to do well (count as justified, rational, etc.), from an epistemic point of view, is for the belief to help promote or bring the things with intrinsic epistemic value.

Goldman puts the point as follows:

I shall attempt to make a case for the unity of epistemic virtues in which the cardinal value, or underlying motif, is something like true, or accurate, belief.... The principal relation that epistemic virtues bear to the core epistemic value will be a teleological or consequentialist one. A process, trait, or action is an epistemic virtue to the extent that it tends to produce, generate, or promote (roughly) true belief. (2002, p. 52)

And according to Alston:

We evaluate something when we dub it good, bad, or indifferent for some purpose or from some point of view.... We evaluate something epistemically (I will be mostly concerned with the evaluation of beliefs) when we judge it to be more or less good from the epistemic point of view, that is, for the attainment of epistemic purposes.... The evaluative aspect of epistemology involves an attempt to identify ways in which the conduct and the products of our cognitive activities can be better or worse vis-à-vis the goals of cognition. And what are those goals? Along with many other epistemologists I suggest that the primary function of cognition in human life is to acquire true beliefs rather than false beliefs about matters that are of interest to us. (2005, p. 28)

When we evaluate a particular belief positively, then, what we are doing is saying that the belief possesses this positive epistemic status derivatively, or in virtue of the fact that it stands in a good relation to the things with intrinsic epistemic value, true beliefs.

If our earlier considerations were correct, however, then at best only a certain subset of truths (or, better, subjects) are plausible candidates for possessing the kind of intrinsic epistemic value described by Goldman and Alston.²¹ Suppose, for example, that the endless wait to see the doctor has driven you to count the number of motes of dust on the doctor's waiting-room coffee table. After a few minutes, you conclude that there are 53 motes. Presumably, as we argued earlier, finding out the truth with respect to the number of motes of dust on the doctor's coffee table is not something that is intrinsically worth doing, from an epistemic point of view. For all that, however, we evidently *can* evaluate—and in certain cases *would* evaluate—the epistemic status of your belief. For example, if you were sloppy and careless in your counting, we would be inclined to judge your belief *unjustified*, depending on the extent of your sloppiness, we might even call it *irrational*, and so on.

But now this leads to trouble for the teleological account in the following way. For if it is true that even beliefs with respect to epistemically insignificant matters—roughly, matters

²¹ Goldman and Alston seem to recognize this tension when they independently try to restrict the realm of things with intrinsic epistemic value to truths (or subjects) of “interest or importance” (see Goldman 2002, p. 61; Alston 2005, p. 32). This restriction only serves to highlight the theory's apparent inability to account for our appraisal of what we might call “trivial beliefs” (as I argue in Grimm forthcoming).

lacking intrinsic epistemic value—can be appraised and evaluated from an epistemic point of view, then it seems to follow that our particular epistemic appraisals cannot, in fact, be understood in terms of goals possessing intrinsic epistemic value, at least not in the straightforwardly teleological way that Goldman and Alston suggest.²² How to proceed from here is a subject I will not take up at this point, but the basic need is clear enough: to identify a theory of epistemic appraisal that treats *both* beliefs both with respect to epistemically trivial matters *and* beliefs with respect to epistemically profound matters as on all fours with respect to our practice of epistemic appraisal.^{23,24}

²² For further criticism of the teleological approach to epistemic evaluation, see Sosa (2003) and Kelly (2003).

²³ Sosa (forthcoming) offers a particularly promising theory of this sort. For further criticism see also Grimm (forthcoming).

²⁴ I would like to thank Robert Audi, Marian David, Michael DePaul, John Greco, Ernest Sosa, Fritz Warfield, and the anonymous referee for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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