

Comments on Martin Kusch's "Testimony and the Value of Knowledge"

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Martin's paper is chock full of interesting ideas. Among the virtues of these ideas is that they bring work from the history and sociology of science to bear on value-driven epistemology. This attempt to infuse a new perspective into the field is very welcome. It helps us look afresh at standard issues like the swamping problem, and it connects those standard issues to a variety of phenomena like social justice that might at first seem unrelated.¹

Martin's main thesis is that we can illuminate the value of knowledge via a modified version of Craig's genealogy of the concept KNOWS. Very roughly, Craig's genealogy is a hypothetical story about why humans in a state of nature would have a need to possess KNOWS, or at least a precursor to that concept, and how such a concept might come into existence. To put it in a somewhat sloganized form, the genealogy is an attempt to show why

if KNOWS didn't exist we'd need to invent it,

and how we'd go about doing that.

On Craig's story, people start with a need to identify sources of good information, and end up inventing the concept PROTOKNOWER as a label for testifiers who fall under that description. Then the concept PROTOKNOWER eventually evolves and gives rise to the concept KNOWS, which to this day bears the mark of its history forged by the need to identify good informants.

Martin's paper is an attempt to modify this story of Craig's in a variety of ways that make it immune to a variety of Kvanvig-inspired objections including a version of the swamping problem. Let me give a very quick and cursory summary of these objections and Martin's attempts to modify Craig's story in response to them; then I'll raise some critical questions.

The first objection is a version of the swamping argument. One might think that true belief formed via testimony from tagged protoknowers is no better than mere true belief. It might then seem that on Craigian accounts of knowledge, all the value of knowledge is swamped by the value of mere true belief.

Martin's main reply to this worry (and a related worry that he calls "the conflation objection") is that the social institution of testimony is valuable *intrinsically*. Somehow, this intrinsic value of the institution of testimony is supposed to render Craigian accounts of knowledge immune to the swamping problem. However, I'm not sure exactly how this is supposed to work – exactly how, from the view that the institution of testimony is intrinsically valuable, it follows that Craigian accounts of knowledge are immune to the swamping problem. I'll discuss this further in a moment. But first let me briefly describe the rest of the objections against Craigian views that Martin raises and tries to answer.

The next objection is that the Craigian story is not social enough. In response to this worry, Martin argues that in accepting and refusing to accept the testimony of others we honor and

¹ Miranda Fricker (1998) and Don Fallis (2004) also connect value-driven epistemology to social justice.

shame them, attribute various sorts of freedom to them, and in some cases even unjustly discriminate against them. If these activities aren't deeply social, then it is hard to see what is.

Finally, Martin addresses the objection that Craig's story is irrelevant because it is merely hypothetical. Here Martin brings in some very interesting work from the history of science on the development of the institution of testimony in Boyle's time. By adding this work to Craig's theory, Martin produces a result that is part imaginary history, but also part real history.

These objections and Martin's replies to them constitute the heart of the paper. Now that we have a brief outline of them on the table, we are in a position to raise some critical questions.

In these critical questions I'll focus on Martin's treatment of the swamping problem. According to that treatment, Craigian accounts of knowledge are immune to the swamping problem because the institution of testimony is intrinsically valuable.

Most of you will probably balk at the idea that the institution of testimony is intrinsically valuable. But I don't think we should focus our critical questions on that point. Instead, we should assume for the sake of argument that it is in fact the case that the institution of testimony is intrinsically valuable. On the basis of that assumption, it seems reasonable to ask: how exactly does the intrinsic value of institution of testimony confer a special and unique value on *knowledge*, as opposed to other states like *true belief* and *justified true belief*?

This question isn't adequately answered by simply rejecting what the early Kvanvig called atomism.² Following Martin and the early Kvanvig, we can take our explanandum to be the value of bodies of knowledge, as opposed to the value of particular items of knowledge. Why should the intrinsic value of the institution of testimony render these bodies of knowledge valuable? In particular, why should the intrinsic value of the institution of testimony render bodies of knowledge more valuable than it renders bodies of true belief or bodies of justified true belief?

It may not at first be clear why this question is pertinent to Martin's treatment of the value problem. Thus, to clarify that pertinence, we should consider some particular cases.

Suppose there are two communities, the good community and the bad community. The good community is much like our own. It has a healthy institution of testimony that consistently transfers knowledge from testifiers to listeners. Furthermore, it has a history exactly like that described in the modified Craigian genealogy that Martin proposes.

Until a few centuries ago, the bad community had that very same history. But then some moderately malevolent demons showed up. Being only moderately malevolent, these demons had no interest in envatting people. Rather, they got their kicks from *Gettierizing* people. Thus they took great pleasure in planting misleading evidence that people did not possess, erecting fake facades around the objects about which people formed perceptual beliefs, and so on. Being demons, they did these things very effectively.

² See Kvanvig 1992.

These moderately malevolent demons are still up to their mischief – they never left. However, no one in the bad community has ever known they are there. To the members of the bad community, everything seems very similar to the way it seems in the good community.

In the bad community as well as the good one, people nearly always get true information from the testimony of whoever they tag as knowers. In the bad community as well as the good one, people honor one another by taking their testimony in earnest, and shame one another by refusing to take their testimony. In the bad community as well as the good one, people attribute freedom and discretion over practice to one another by taking them as legitimate testifiers. And, unfortunately, both the bad and the good communities include some groups of people who are victims of *epistemic injustice*, in that they deserve to be honored as legitimate testifiers but nonetheless rarely are.

Despite all these normative commonalities, the *good community's* institution of testimony consistently gives rise to knowledge, whereas the *bad community's* institution of testimony consistently gives rise to mere justified true belief.

So it seems that the institution of testimony can be just as valuable when it produces mere justified true belief, as it is when it produces knowledge. As a result, it seems like the intrinsic value of the institution of testimony confers just as much value on mere justified true belief as it confers on knowledge. But then, it is not clear how appeals to the institution of testimony can render Craigian accounts of knowledge immune to the swamping problem, or at least the versions of that problem that compares knowledge to justified true belief.

One obvious response to this worry is to deny that the institutions of testimony in the good community and the bad community are equally valuable. But in what could the extra value of the one institution over the other reside? One possible answer, which is briefly hinted at in the paper, is this: *knowledge itself* is intrinsically valuable, and it is simply in virtue of lacking this intrinsically valuable thing that the testimony institution of the bad community is worse off than the testimony institution of the good community.

It may well be true that knowledge is intrinsically valuable.³ But if we end up having to advert to that view in the end, why we should bother with going through all the complications of genealogy and history in the first place? Why not just *start* with the view that knowledge is intrinsically valuable, and then see what we can explain in terms of that view?

There may well be good answers to these questions, answers perhaps having to do with the networked value of knowledge as it interacts with other things of intrinsic and extrinsic value. If there are such answers, then perhaps Martin would be so kind as to share them with us.

Fallis, Don. 2004. "Epistemic value theory and information ethics". *Minds and Machines* 14: 101-117.

Fricker, Miranda. 1998. "Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

Kvanvig, Jonathan. 1992. *Intellectual virtues and the life of the mind*. Rowman and Littlefield.

³ I actually think that *is* true, and that its truth has important ramifications for the swamping problem literature. See my manuscript "Knowledge, Virtue, and Truth".