

## Love of Knowledge as an Intellectual Virtue

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### Introduction

The dispositions of desire, emotional response, and choice that constitute the excellent formation of the will have been, from ancient times to the present, much noticed in discussions of ethics, but remarkably less in epistemology. Despite omitting the will from his account of the intellectual virtues, Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* by attributing to human nature an appetite for knowledge.

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences among things.<sup>1</sup>

Human beings have several natural dispositions of attraction. We are attracted to food and drink, to members of the opposite sex, to beautiful sights and sounds, to activity (moving, doing, making) and, as both Aristotle and Nietzsche note, to the exercise of power over things, other people, and ourselves; Aristotle points out in this famous passage that our species is also attracted to knowledge. We enjoy knowing things; we spend money on books; we take pleasure in noticing differences and similarities, say, in being able to distinguish the plants and birds in our surroundings, in being able to associate some birds with one bird-group, others with another. Taxonomy satisfies. Aristotle here emphasizes a simple variety of the kind of knowledge that might call “acquaintance”: the baby explores with his eyes, his ears, his hands, his mouth; but even in our remotest maturity we take pleasure in the kind of contact with reality that we call seeing for ourselves. Sometimes this seeing is literal sensory experience (“Let *me*

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1, 980a20-28, translated by W. D. Ross in *Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 689.

look in the telescope”), sometimes it is mathematical or conceptual insight or religious experience. And even when it is sensory, it may be at the same time conceptual (scientific, moral, religious). But acquaintance is not the only kind of knowledge we thirst for and enjoy. We take pleasure in deepened explanatory competence, in the ability to interpret texts, in the confirmation or disconfirmation of beliefs and hypotheses. Aristotle here points to a natural disposition. This natural appetite for knowledge needs to be matured, formed, realized, completed. Everyone has the faculty, presumably, but only a few people ever come to possess its full and mature realization.

In the very young infant the appetitive orientation of which Aristotle writes is perhaps an indiscriminate penchant for cognitive (sensory) stimulation and the activities that promote it. But discriminations soon emerge, and the appetite becomes exploratory — the child wants to know things, to understand how things work. It is as though she is asking questions, thus focusing her desire for knowledge in very personally particular ways (*this* is what *I* want to know). And with further maturity, crucial distinctions come to guide the child’s epistemic activities. She wants true perceptions and beliefs, not false ones; she wants well-grounded beliefs, not vagrant, floating ones; she wants significant rather than trivial, relevant rather than irrelevant, knowledge; she wants deep rather than shallow understanding; and she wants knowledge that ennobles human life and promotes human well-being rather than knowledge that degrades and destroys; she wants to know important truths. The development indicated in the last sentence is often compromised or arrested short of its highest reaches, but the individual who loves and desires knowledge according to the discriminations of significance, relevance, and worthiness has a virtue that we might call love of knowledge.

## Knowledge Among the Human Goods

John Locke describes a virtue marked by “an equal indifferency for all truth, I mean the receiving it in the love of it as truth, but not loving it for any other reason before we know it to be true” (*Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, §12).<sup>2</sup> We will try to understand what this loving indifferency amounts to, but we can begin by specifying one thing that it cannot reasonably be. Many propositions of which a person could have knowledge are, absent very special circumstances, of no interest whatsoever, so that a person who equally loved all of them would not thereby display virtue, but instead a weird intellectual pathology. Imagine a lover of truth who with equal indifferency wanted to adjudicate the truth values of 1) a charge of capital crime against his mother and 2) the proposition that the third letter in the 41,365<sup>th</sup> listing in the 1977 Wichita telephone directory is a ‘d’. The world is rife with truths of the latter sort, and a person who aspired to know them with indifferency of enthusiasm would not be a model epistemic agent. Instead, the healthy, well-functioning agent loves some propositions (is interested in them, that is) far more than others — before he knows which ones are true.

One kind of principle of discrimination is the criterion for propositional knowledge. The lover of knowledge wants his beliefs to be true, and to be adequately supported, in whatever way of supporting is appropriate to his particular belief in its particular circumstances. So the virtuous epistemic agent will insist on these conditions and will choose practices that tend to satisfy them and will feel emotional discomfort when his desire for them is frustrated. Given a certain aptitude, he will tend to get truth and adequate support *because* he wants and pursues them. But an agent whose passion for knowledge involved only these principles of discrimination would exemplify the

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<sup>2</sup> In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, edited by Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), p. 186.

kind of indifference that we just condemned. So other criteria of discrimination must be essential to a virtuous love of knowledge.

If beliefs often need support, then beliefs can gain in value by being supports for other beliefs. So not only is *having* support a sometime desideratum in beliefs; a belief's *providing* support for other beliefs can also make it more interesting than some others, and a belief can be trivial because of its utter lack of a supporting role. One reason why the belief about the Wichita phone book lacks allure is that, barring very special circumstances, nothing rides on it. By contrast, the explanations of anomalies in biology are usually highly significant, in that they press for revisions of other biological beliefs, on which, in turn, still other beliefs depend.

The fact and extent of some knowledge's bearing an epistemic load is thus one of the criteria by which the lover of knowledge discriminates in her appetite for knowledge. She will tend to be more resolutely attached to more load bearing beliefs, acquaintances, and understandings, and more interested in assessing the truth-value of proposed ones that seem to her to bear more of a load. However, load-bearing *by itself* is not much of a value, since the load that a belief bears may itself be trivial or irrelevant, as multiple applications of the rule of addition on our phone book example shows.

A more basic criterion is one that we call worthiness. Propositional knowledge, understanding, and insight are important, not taken in abstraction, but in connection with their bearing on human flourishing and the intrinsic importance of their objects. Knowing the truth in a criminal trial, understanding the mind of the accused, hearing the emotion in his voice, are important because justice is important. Getting a diagnosis right and understanding how a disease agent works are important because people's health is at stake. So in the epistemically virtuous person the disposition of caring about the intellectual goods will derive in part from a disposition of caring about other goods

such as justice, human wellbeing, and friendship. Love of the intellectual goods properly resides within the concern for what Aristotle calls eudaimonia — the broadest and deepest human wellbeing. So love of the epistemic goods is not a virtue in abstraction from other virtues, like justice, compassion, and a sense of civic duty.

But we are not saying that knowledge is valuable only if it is “practical.” Some things are worth knowing even if the knowledge has no “application.” Why is it worth knowing how old the universe is, while it is not worth knowing how many grains of sand are in a particular cc of the Sahara Desert (assuming that both truths are “useless”)? Why is it worth having a map of the entire human genome, even apart from the medical applications? The value of inquiry often turns on the value of the thing to be known. Organisms are excellent and beautiful things in their own right; human beings are glorious and important (to us, but just as some insect is also glorious, the value of human beings is not simply a parochial human affair). The universe, with all its processes, is worthy of respect. And this worthiness of the objects of knowledge is tied to their particular character — their particular complexity and simplicity, the particulars of their structure and composition and functions. The human genome is interesting because of what it is, whereas the cc of the Sahara, simply as so many grains of sand together, is uninteresting because of what *it* is. And the epistemic correlative of complexity-simplicity-functioning is not “knowing facts” but “understanding.” The point of knowing the age of the universe is not that of having a number to put on it, but of the web of connections on which that number depends, the other parts of the story of the development of the universe, the explanation and the grasping of it. Again, the value of the epistemic goods is interconnected with other goods — now not just with human eudaimonia but also with the value of the universe, of the things that are known.

The criterion of intrinsic value of a potential object of knowledge is vague, and we have certainly not developed it significantly here. But we can say one more thing. Fictional objects—say, the Star Wars series or J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy—sometimes have a complexity and simplicity, a structure, that is analogous to the human genome or the evolution of the universe. Their intrinsic character may render them worthy to be studied, but this worthiness seems much less than that of something that is real; and we think that much of the legitimate interest that such fictional objects have depends on their reflecting reality in one way or another. We should not be taken as suggesting that the intrinsic worthiness of a real object trumps the worthiness of any fictional object. We want to allow, for example, that knowledge of Middlemarch may be more worthy than knowledge of a real car.

The proper lover of knowledge will value some knowledge more than others because some knowledge is more worthy. People differ as to the kinds of truths they take an interest in, and the differences can be differences of intellectual virtue, according to the quality of the goods the people care about. Individuals who are concerned about the truths they read in *Science* magazine, or the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *National Geographic*, the *New York Review of Books*, or *Books and Culture*, are in this respect more virtuous than people who are most interested in the truths they read in *People* magazine or the gossip columns, because the truths that are found there are mostly trivial or even salacious and invidious (that is, the truths aren’t vicious, but it is less than virtuous to care about them, or to care much about them). This may sound elitist, but if it is, this is an elitism we cannot avoid. The aim of liberal arts programs in colleges and universities is not just to transmit a bit of the higher kind of knowledge to their students, but to nurture in them a discriminating love of knowledge and thus to create in them a distaste — or at any rate, a limited patience — for trivial knowledge.

A third principle of discrimination is relevance. Beliefs, understandings, insights, and perceptions can be very significant in the sense that other epistemic goods rest on them, and worthy in the sense that their objects are intrinsically important or bear on human eudaimonia, without being of much interest to a given person or group at a given time because these are not relevant to their current concerns. It is not for everyone to know the details of Samuel Johnson's life or important facts in quantum mechanics, despite the ramifications and intrinsic value of such knowledge, because some bits of important knowledge are necessarily restricted to a small community of specialists. No human being can know all important knowledge. People's special placement in society and their already existing fund of knowledge can make certain pieces of knowledge relevant to them which are not relevant to many other lovers of knowledge. Conversely, knowledge can be highly relevant without bearing much epistemic weight or being generally very important: Sometimes the most relevant question is "Where are my keys?" or "How can I get some food for my family?" The intellectually virtuous person is acutely circumspect — that is, has a strong and sharp sense of the relevance of the parts of his knowledge to his current circumstances and his finitude; and his appetite for knowledge will be governed, in part, by his sense of relevancy.

It would be a mistake to attribute to the lover of knowledge a too methodical approach to its acquisition, one whereby she governed her intellectual behavior by an explicit and rigid appeal to principles of load-bearing, worthiness, and relevance, carefully and decisively shunning all experiences, insights, and beliefs that did not satisfy the criteria for properly lovable knowledge. Even the most brilliant and best educated human being is not in a position to recognize with sufficient reliability the beliefs, insights, and understandings that have the property of proper lovability. Experimentation, trial and error, and muddling about are essential to the life of the

mind. It will be part of the flexible practical wisdom of the intellectually virtuous individual to know when to play with ideas, hypotheses, interpretations, images, experiences, and formulas, sometimes with only a vague sense of the positive value of the objects of play. Thus the lover of knowledge, whether she is a scientist, an interpreter of texts, an historian, or a layperson interested in any of these fields, will on occasion exemplify something like the Derridean-Nietzschean virtue of epistemic playfulness. The difference between the lover of knowledge and the authentic Derridean-Nietzschean is that in the lover of knowledge epistemic playfulness is just one of the many virtues which, in her practical wisdom, the agent exemplifies as occasion calls for.

If the love of knowledge is governed by these kinds of discriminations, what can Locke mean by “equal indifferency for all truth”? He identifies the counterpart intellectual vice as “prejudice.” A person who suffers from prejudice adheres to certain beliefs for inadequate reasons, such as that he likes believing them, that it would cause him anxiety to give them up, that this is what people in his tribe have always believed, and that the investigations leading to the revision of these beliefs would cost him more trouble than he wants to spend. The lover of knowledge is free from prejudice. Described in our terms, prejudice is a malformation of the epistemic will. The four examples of inappropriate reasons that we have just attributed to the prejudiced are all appetitive states — aversions, preferences, attachments — which may not always be bad, except as they override the good of knowing the truth. The lover of truth, by contrast,

must suppose... that his persuasion is built upon good grounds, and that his assent is no greater than what the evidence of the truth he holds forces him to, and that they are arguments and not inclination or fancy that make him so confident and positive in his tenets.

And the test of whether he really and honestly loves belief-as-adequately-grounded above all such competitors as we mentioned above is his openness to hear criticism and revise his opinions:

Now if, after all his profession, he cannot bear any opposition to his opinion, if he cannot so much as give a patient hearing, much less examine and weigh the arguments on the other side, does he not plainly confess it is prejudice governs him? (*Conduct*, §10, p. 184).

What shall we say about Locke's sketch of the lover of knowledge in the light of the set of principles of discrimination that we have laid out? We note first that Locke seems to be concerned primarily with the discriminations associated with the structure of propositional knowledge. We have argued that commitment to such knowledge is not enough for someone to count as a lover of knowledge. Furthermore, Locke's conception of adequate grounding is evidentialist, and we would propose a more pluralistic understanding of warrant. We concur that where evidence is called for, the lover of knowledge will discriminate among beliefs on the basis of the evidence for them; but in addition to allowing for a variety of kinds of warrant, whose adequacy varies with the beliefs in question and their circumstances, the lover of knowledge will have a more complex set of principles, which he will apply with practical wisdom according to kinds of beliefs and their circumstances. We also agree that mere preference for a belief, fear of emotional distress, and aversion to exertion are usually not adequate reasons for retaining an important belief that one has been given some reason to abandon. While we do not want to rule that retaining a belief for any of these reasons is incompatible with love of knowledge, we agree that they are uncharacteristic for a person with the virtue. We also want to allow that the lover of knowledge may have some of the impulses of the prejudiced — an anxiety about putting his pet beliefs in jeopardy, a certain aversion to long drawn-out investigations, and so forth — but he

also has a counterbalancing love of the intellectual goods, discriminated according to their significance, relevance, and worthiness, and he has a toughness of self-discipline that allows him to override these less worthy motivations when they threaten his intellectual life, with more or fewer efforts of self-management.

But Locke is far from advocating an indiscriminate obligation to ground our beliefs in argument and evidence. He says that since life is short and knowledge hard to come by,

it becomes our prudence, in our search after knowledge, to employ our thoughts about fundamental and material questions, carefully avoiding those that are trifling.... How much of many young men's time is thrown away in purely logical inquiries ...is much worse than for a young painter to spend his apprenticeship...in examining the threads of the several cloths he is to paint upon, and counting the hairs of each pencil and brush he intends to use in the laying on of his colors. ...superficial and slight discoveries and observations that contain nothing of moment in themselves, nor serve as clues to lead us into farther knowledge, should be lightly passed by, and never thought worth our searching after (*Conduct*, §43, p. 222).

We can further our understanding of the love of knowledge by reflecting on shortfalls and deviations from it. Faulty epistemic will encompasses immaturity and vice. Immaturity is a fault, not among the very young, whose immaturity is perfectly normal, or among the congenitally defective, whose "immaturity" is inevitable, but among those who are old enough and well enough endowed to be properly developed, but aren't. Accordingly, our discussion can be divided along four lines: Immature concerns to know, vicious concerns to know, immature concerns not to know, and vicious concerns not to know.

1. *Immature concerns to know*. Since the disposition to love knowledge is an in-built aspect of human nature, we are not likely to find many members of the human race who lack interest in all kinds whatsoever of cognitive stimulation or activity. In this

respect the sheep diverge from the goats along the lines of discrimination that we outlined in the second section of this chapter. Consider some of the more typical kinds of faulty cognitive indifference to be met with among human beings.

a. Locke comments that some people, while not by any means “indifferent for their own opinions” (indeed these people are passionately attached to their own opinions), are not “concerned, as they should be, to know whether [their opinions] are true or false” (*Conduct*, §12, p. 187). One sign of insufficient concern for truth is that when such people are given an opportunity to test their more cherished beliefs, they decline it, or apply it too casually, or offer defenses of the beliefs that are weaker than any that these people would accept in other contexts.

b. Connected with the intellectual defects of caring too little about truth and grounding is a casualness about understanding, a complacency about letting certain things, which one could understand with effort, go understood. The very best intellectual agents are alert to deficiencies in their understanding and continually seek to untie the knots in it and deepen it. Most intellectual endeavors afford plenty of scope for improvement of understanding, and a person who insists inordinately on understanding everything can, admittedly, become discouraged or tire himself to the point of sickening. So again, judgment and balance are requisite.

c. A similar complacency about important kinds of acquaintance is an immaturity in the same vein. For example, facing our own emotions, though important, is often difficult for people. We do not like to admit that we are feeling guilty about something we have done; we give ourselves “justifications” for our action that shield us a bit from the experience of the emotion, yet it is there waiting with its impact were we to look straight at it. Or we avoid feeling the envy that is working in us, again telling ourselves stories about our situation that are calculated (in an inexplicit sort of way) to shield us

from full perception of the emotion. Feeling these emotions (as compared with a mere “intellectual” acknowledgement that we have them) is an important part of self-knowledge; in the feelings we may have access to a clear and distinct idea what we are like.<sup>1</sup> But some of us systematically shield ourselves from this self-knowledge and while in a sense we “know” these emotions are present, we keep our backs turned and so remain in the twilight about ourselves.

2. *Unvirtuous concerns to know.* We have argued that loving knowledge as good in itself is compatible with discriminating grades of knowledge, where the grading is determined by human wellbeing and the importance of the objects of knowledge. These ways that the value of other things affects the value of knowledge make possible unvirtuous or even vicious concerns to know. Let us distinguish instrumental from non-instrumental unvirtuous concerns to know.

People desire to know things for a wide variety of instrumental reasons. Knowledge can be the way to finishing that damned dissertation, making money, getting a Nobel prize, or plumbing the basement, to mention just a few. In some of these cases, desiring knowledge solely for the kind of reason in question is perfectly compatible with the highest intellectual virtue. The knowledge of how to plumb the basement seems have no value beyond the instrumental; so one is none the less virtuous for desiring that knowledge than the intention of having a hot shower. But in other cases there is something intellectually immature, to say the least, about somebody who seeks the kind of knowledge in question solely for instrumental reasons. If the knowledge in the dissertation is worth writing a dissertation about, then something is wrong if your only interest in it is in finishing the dissertation. If a piece of knowledge merits a Nobel prize, one who desires that knowledge only for the Prize has a defective epistemic will. The point is not that wanting the Nobel Prize is in itself perverse (though

it's not particularly admirable either), but that wanting something as worthy as important scientific knowledge less than one wants the incidental good that it procures shows a corrupted or immature spirit.

Some goals for which high-level knowledge is instrumental are, however, much more worthy than the goals of fame and fortune embodied in the Nobel Prize. The medical applications of biological knowledge would be an example. A person who seeks biological knowledge solely for the sake of its medical applications is more mature, intellectually, than one who seeks the same knowledge solely for the Nobel Prize, for at least two reasons. First, the medical applications are the kind of eudaimonia-integral rationale that more broadly contributes to the value of knowledge in the first place; second, medical knowledge is internal to such applications, in the same way that a knowledge of justice is internal to justice in court cases. By contrast, biological knowledge is not internal to prestige and money.

Non-instrumental desires for knowledge can also be vicious or immature, through lack of circumspection. Circumspection is a concern for the values that the knowledge, or the pursuit of it, would affect, along with good judgment about the possible effects of the research or the resulting knowledge. Nazi medical researchers using concentration-camp prisoners as subjects in experiments with obvious and horrendous harmful consequences for the subjects provide clear examples of extreme vice. Nuclear physicists or biologists working on weapons of mass destruction provide more ambiguous examples. Since intellectual circumspection has both a motivational and a "success" component, an individual scientist could fall short of virtue either by caring too little about the possible consequences of her researches, or by lacking good judgment about those consequences. The present point is just that such vice or

immaturity is compatible with desiring the knowledge in a purely non-instrumental way.

3. *Immature concerns not to know.* We have seen that because of the criteria of worthiness and relevance by which the mature lover of knowledge selects propositional knowledge, understanding, and acquaintance, he actually has a will *not* to know certain things that he could know but ought not to know. Examples illustrating this point have been given in the preceding subsection, where we stressed perverse or immature concerns to know what is irrelevant or unworthy, so here we will note briefly that the faulty epistemic will is characterized not only by inappropriate concerns for knowledge, but by a deficit of those concerns that might override the inappropriate ones. Examples include the possibility of a scientist's improper desire for understanding, the gossip's improper love of nosey propositional knowledge, and the ogler's improper love of a certain kind of acquaintance. In the virtuous lover of knowledge, these kinds of knowledge are discriminated against by a certain orientation of taste, a concern for other things that rules out (or at least rules against) the improper love.

Very likely, a human being who was intensely interested in high-level scientific questions and saw the likelihood that she (or her contemporaries) would be unable to handle the proposed knowledge, would still, at some level or in some degree, want the knowledge. So here, temptation will be normal for the lover of knowledge. A biologist involved in cloning research or a physicist working on nuclear fission, even if, as mature reflective lovers of knowledge, they are fully aware of the difficulties that humanity will have handling the potential new knowledge, will desire it. But if they have a strong sense of the place of knowledge in human eudaimonia, their sense of the knowledge's potential for evil will also give them a cautioning concern that countervails against the desire in the particular case. So the concern for human wellbeing and the

ability to make this concern activate one's powers of discrimination of worthiness or relevance in the pursuit of knowledge make the difference between a Frankenstein or a Nazi medical researcher, on the one hand, and a virtuous lover of knowledge on the other. Here the moral and the intellectual come together in the virtue of practical wisdom. Knowledge is only one of the important goods constituting human flourishing, but it is deeply entangled with those other goods.

Since cases in which the lover of knowledge chooses to eschew high level but eudaimonistically unfitting knowledge are likely always to involve conflicting motives, the lover of knowledge will have to have, not just these two conflicting concerns — the love of knowledge thought of more abstractly and the love of human wellbeing — and the practical wisdom to know how to balance these in particular cases; he or she will also have to have the potential for self-denial, the power of self-mastery, that makes it possible for him to do what he takes to be best despite strongly wishing to do something else. The person who falls short of the virtue of love of knowledge will, therefore, fall short in one or all of these three ways: he will lack a clear and intense concern for the wellbeing of humanity, or he will have abstracted that concern so thoroughly from his intellectual life that he is undisposed to recruit this concern in decisions of the present sort or, while he both has the concern and recruits it, he suffers so from weakness of will that he cannot implement his practical wisdom in this regard.

4. *Unvirtuous concerns not to know.* When we were discussing unvirtuous failures of concern to know, some of the cases involved a concern *not* to know, a positive aversion to the epistemic goods. Thus sometimes people do not want to know the truth about their bank balance or whether their kids are on drugs. Or they want not to perceive their own emotions or the anomalies to their scientific hypothesis. Or they want not to understand the causes of their obesity or the arguments against their

religion. Such anti-epistemic motivational dispositions are principles of intellectual vice or immaturity. Our earlier point was that such bases of vice can be mitigated by an increase in sensitivity to the goodness of the epistemic goods, a deepened appreciation and desire for truth, warrant, understanding, and acquaintance. But it seems clear that one could also approach motivational improvement or repair by reducing these aversions. Such positive aversions are rooted in personal interests: I don't want to know the truth about my bank balance because I want to continue to spend freely; I don't want to know that my kid is on drugs because then I'll have to do something about it and I have no idea where to start. I don't want to perceive my own guilt or envy because it will indicate my personal nastiness. I don't want to see the anomalies to my hypothesis because I have invested years in this research and I'm afraid to change paths.

It is not hard to see that a number of these anti-epistemic personal interests are morally substandard, or would threaten my intellectual life less if I had more of a virtue like courage. If I were more responsible in spending my money, I wouldn't be averse to knowing my bank balance. If I were more committed to helping my kid and more courageous in facing her problems, I would want to know what she is doing with drugs. If I had greater trust in God I would have no interest in hiding behind an ignorance of the objections that can be made to my religion. So we see that, at least in many cases, positive aversion to intellectual goods is mitigated, or corrected for, by an increase in the virtues that are usually regarded as moral.

