

The Bearers and Makers of the Value of Knowledge¹

Kristoffer Ahlström, Department of Philosophy, Gothenburg University

It has become popular within contemporary epistemology to explain such notions as ‘justification’ and ‘knowledge’ in terms of epistemically virtuous faculties, understood as *reliable* faculties, or, alternatively put, faculties that tend to generate true beliefs.² We may spell out a generic virtue epistemological approach to knowledge thus:

S knows that p iff (a) S believes that p , (b) it is true that p and (c) S ’s believing that p is the result of a virtuous (i.e., reliable) faculty.

For brevity’s sake, I will shorten this formulation to

(1) SK that $p =_{df.} SB_{T,R}$ that p ,

which is to be read as “‘ S knows that p ’ is defined as ‘ S believes truly and reliably that p .’”³ I will not argue for (1) but instead assume it for the sake of seeing whether it is subject to a particular problem pertaining to the value of knowledge. My inquiry is motivated by the fact that some epistemologists⁴ have complained that we cannot both adhere to a definition like (1) and, at the same time, take truth to be the only intrinsic epistemic *value-maker*—in the sense that truth is the only property conferring (positive) intrinsic epistemic value on doxastic states—on pain of not being able to explain why knowledge is more valuable than belief.⁵ According to said epistemologists, if truth is the only intrinsic value-maker, the *reliability* of the belief-forming process does not add anything to the value of a subject’s knowing that is not already present due to the *truth* of the belief and, hence, cannot explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief. (We will look into exactly what it is to be an *intrinsic* value-maker below.) This is the so-called *value problem*. To use

¹ Draft May 2006.

² See, e.g., Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; James Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993; and Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. For a good review on recent work within virtue epistemology, see G. Axtell, ‘Recent Work on Virtue Epistemology,’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34, pp. 1-26, 1997.

³ Here I am intentionally ignoring some subtleties regarding whether it is sufficient that the belief in question is true *and* reliably formed (perhaps due to some quirk in the subject’s environment), or whether it must be true *because* it is reliably formed—subtleties that do not matter for the discussion at hand.

⁴ See, e.g., Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Linda Zagzebski, “Epistemic Value Monism,” in *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*, ed. John Greco, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004; and Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵ I will, henceforth, often leave out the qualification ‘epistemic’ in ‘intrinsic epistemic value’ and ‘intrinsic epistemic value-maker.’

Jonathan Kvanvig's term, the problem is that the value of truth seems to *swamp* the value of reliable belief-formation.⁶

The following is a reconstruction of the argument:

- (i) Assume (1);
- (ii) Swamping premise: $V(\text{SB}_{T,R} \text{ that } p) = V(\text{SB}_T \text{ that } p)$;
- (iii) Hence, $V(\text{SK} \text{ that } p) = V(\text{SB}_T \text{ that } p)$, from (i) and (ii);
- (iv) But it is intuitively the case that $V(\text{SK} \text{ that } p) > V(\text{SB}_T \text{ that } p)$;
- (v) Hence, we reject (1) by a *reductio*.

Now, (ii) is clearly the central premise and it is also the one I will contest. One way to argue that it holds, however, is by considering the following analogy by Kvanvig: Say that you want chocolate. You generate two lists, one listing nearby places *likely to sell* chocolate, and one listing nearby places that *do sell* chocolate. Clearly, you would prefer the latter list. Now, someone provides you with a third list, namely the intersection of the two lists, which tells you which places are not only *likely to sell* chocolate but also, in fact, *do*. As noted by Kvanvig, you have no reason to prefer this third list to the second.⁷

The analogy to epistemic inquiry is supposed to be the following:

...when accounting for the value of knowledge, we must always be alert to ways in which the various values interact. This point implies that *more is required to account for the value of knowledge than merely finding it to have valuable constituents*.⁸

So, in the particular case of reliability, the moral of the value problem is that while it might very well be the case that believing truly is valuable in the sense that it is more valuable than believing falsely, i.e.,

$$(2) V(\text{SB}_T \text{ that } p) > V(\text{SB}_F \text{ that } p),$$

as well as that believing reliably is valuable in the sense that it is more valuable than believing unreliably, i.e.,

$$(3) V(\text{SB}_R \text{ that } p) > V(\text{SB}_U \text{ that } p),$$

there is no difference, as far as value goes, between a state of affairs in which an agent believes truly by way of an unreliable process and one in which an agent believes truly by way of a virtuous (i.e., reliable) faculty. Once truth is present and given that truth is the only intrinsic value-maker, it simply makes the value of any further truth-conducive factor otiose. Hence, (ii).

1. VALUE MONISM

Is (ii) plausible? Let us start by looking closer at two possible formulations of the *value monism* at work here:

(EVM) The only intrinsic epistemic value-maker for any epistemic state is truth.⁹

⁶ See Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. See also Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.

⁷ See Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, pp. 47-48.

⁸ Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, p. 48; my emphasis.

(*DVM*) The only intrinsic epistemic value-maker for (doxastic) states of the type ‘ SB_T that p ’ and ‘ SB_F that p ’ is truth.

I will refer to the former thesis as *epistemic value monism* and the latter as *doxastic value monism* and say that value-bearer a has *intrinsic value* in virtue of having property V , if V is a non-relational, value-making property. That V is non-relational is supposed to mirror the Moorean intuition that something has intrinsic value if it is valuable even when considered in complete isolation or, alternatively, if it were the only thing in existence.

Now, Ernest Sosa, in his discussion of the value problem, has the former and stronger thesis in mind.¹⁰ So does Linda Zagzebski when she considers the claim that “any epistemic value other than the truth of a belief derives from the good of truth.”¹¹ However, Sosa explicitly considers (*EVM*) a working assumption and notes, for example, that the value of understanding probably cannot be reduced to a question of truth.¹² One way to bring out Sosa’s point is as follows. First, assume that we, as epistemic agents, strive for a lot of things. We want our beliefs to be true but we also want to understand things, for our belief systems to be coherent, our judgment to be wise, our reasons to be well-grounded, our arguments to be valid, etc. For this reason, all these properties may qualify as epistemic value-makers, endowing the states they apply to—be it agents understanding, agents believing in a well-grounded, wise or coherent way, etc.—with epistemic value. This epistemic value can be of either of two kinds, namely intrinsic or instrumental epistemic value. According to (*EVM*), the latter would have to be the case, since truth, according to that thesis, is the only epistemic value-maker. If that were so, however, it would be impossible for understanding, well-groundedness, wisdom, coherence, etc. to confer any epistemic value on agents believing p falsely.¹³ This seems downright false. Hence, we need to reject (*EVM*).

So, it seems like, in order to count understanding, wisdom, well-groundedness, coherence, etc., as value-makers, we either need to construe them in terms of (a) an inherent intrinsic epistemic value or (b) an instrumental value that is not connected to truth but some other property. In either case, (*EVM*) comes out false. Hence, (*DVM*) is clearly a more plausible formulation of value monism, since it restricts itself to saying that, as far as instances of agents believing that p truly or falsely go, truth is the only intrinsic value-maker. However, it leaves it open whether other ways of believing that p —such as believing in a wise or coherent way, or a way that yields understanding—may also be intrinsically valuable. We will return to this distinction between different ways of believing later.

2. STABILITY AND THE VALUE OF RELIABILITY

Let us now turn to what is wrong with premise (ii) above. Epistemic inquiry is best construed as an inquiry stretching over time. Hence, we are, as epistemic agents, not just interested in *this* belief being true *now*; we are also interested in our stock of beliefs remain-

⁹ The qualification ‘for any epistemic state’ is important since, as pointed out by Sosa (“Reply to Linda Zagzebski,” in *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*, p. 320), we do not want to say that all things true are thereby also valuable. This would commit us to the idea that such things as true sentences, inscriptions, and propositions are valuable.

¹⁰ See also Zagzebski, “Epistemic Value Monism,” for a similar interpretation.

¹¹ Zagzebski, “Epistemic Value Monism,” p. 191.

¹² Sosa, “The Place of Truth in Epistemology,” p. 8, note 5.

¹³ Here I assume these states are non-factive in the sense that they do not imply truth. If the reader does not agree, she may remove whichever state she considers factive from my argument, since I feel confident that there will remain at least one—which is all my argument against (*EVM*) requires.

ing more or less *stable*, in that we do not want the truth values of our beliefs to fluctuate more than necessary over time.¹⁴ (This wish might, naturally, be overridden by other, non-epistemic considerations in situations that are not purely epistemic.) For this reason, I will assume that properties contributing to the stability of beliefs may be counted as epistemic value-makers. If we were only to employ (correctly) deductive ampliative methods, we might have been guaranteed that a true stock of beliefs today would not get contaminated by false beliefs tomorrow. But since we, in fact, also (and perhaps more often than not) employ a whole host of non-deductive methods, the best guarantee that our belief stock will remain stable is that it is generated by reliable or truth-conducive processes. In other words, reliable belief-forming processes may be counted as an epistemic value-maker for instances of believing. Hence, (3) above.

The value thus conferred by reliable belief-formation is instrumental. Keeping in mind the diachronic character of epistemic inquiry, we see that it is certainly possible for reliability to function as a value-maker in the long run due to a *tendency* to generate truths, even if instances of reliable kinds sometimes yield false beliefs. What is at issue, however, is that even if reliability may confer value on instances of false believing by virtue of such a tendency, this value is clearly parasitic, feeding on a preponderance of true outputs in the long (and possibly hypothetical) run. Further, if a belief-forming process never produced any true beliefs it would not only cease to be reliable but would also no longer be an epistemic value-maker. This indicates that the value conferred by reliability is instrumentally dependent on its connections to truth. Nevertheless, we shall soon see that there is an important sense in which the value bestowed by reliable believing is not thereby swamped by the presence of true believing.

So, against the background of the above arguments, I will assume that the instrumental value of states involving an agent *S* believing in a reliable way is valuable in accordance with (3) above. Moreover, as initially pointed out, a proponent of argument (i) through (v) need not reject (3). What she needs to reject is rather the following premise:

$$(4) V(SB_{T,R} \text{ that } p) > V(SB_T \text{ that } p).$$

What (4) claims is that the reliability component adds value to the conglomerate state of a person believing reliably and truly and that this value is larger than that of a person who merely believes truly. This is the very idea denied by proponents of premise (ii). So, which one is more plausible: (ii) or (4)?

3. RELIABILITY AND DIACHRONIC INQUIRY

Let us first clarify the ontology. ‘ SB_T that p ’ and ‘ SB_R that p ’ clearly refer to different states. One way to see this is by noting that they may have different properties. While the former can only be epistemically evaluated to the extent of the truth or falsity of p —an intuition that is mirrored by *(DVM)* above—the latter can be evaluated to the extent that p is believed in a reliable (or, alternatively put, virtuous) way. Since the two states may have

¹⁴ Plato stressed the centrality of stability to knowledge—brought about by the ‘tethering’ of beliefs by working out reasons—in what some take to be an early statement of the value problem (see his *Meno* in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns; W.K.C. Guthrie, trans., Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963) and, more recently, by Timothy Williamson in his *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Note, however, that this is not the same kind of stability discussed by John Greco in his *Putting Sceptics in their Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

different properties they cannot, thereby, be the same state (on pain of violating Leibniz’s law).¹⁵

The following might make this point somewhat clearer. There is a multiplicity of *value-bearers* involved in epistemic inquiry, corresponding to different *ways* of believing, several of which we have already touched upon. For example, we have instances of *believing truly*, consisting of a belief state together with a particular external relation to some fact to the effect that it makes the proposition believed true. Such states are valuable to the extent that the proposition believed is true, which is, furthermore, the only source of value for such states according to (*DVM*). Still, this is completely compatible with the existence of other kinds of value-makers pertaining to other value-bearing states. One such state is *coherently believing*, which consists of a belief state together with the obtainment of certain (evidential, probabilistic, logical, etc.) relations between the proposition believed and other propositions found within the agent’s stock of belief. Another one is the somewhat more elusive *believing wisely*, which may consist in something along the lines of certain ways of putting together and acting upon what you believe and may come to believe. The state most interesting for the purposes of this paper, however, is that of *reliably believing*, which consists of a certain relation between a belief state and a belief-forming process, such that the latter is of a kind that tends to generate true beliefs (given that certain environmental conditions obtain, of course). Strictly speaking, the value-making property *reliability* is a property not of the state that is an agent believing, but rather of a particular belief-forming process, i.e., the way in which the agent *attains* the belief. Nevertheless, we argued above that the latter may confer an instrumental value on the former—on the state that is an agent *reliably* believing—since reliability is a way to satisfy our epistemic want for stability within our stock of belief.

As Kvanvig aptly cautioned us above, however, we need to be aware of the ways in which different values interact, in particular, whether some values swamp others. So does the intrinsic value of believing truly swamp the instrumental value of believing reliably? No. In order to realize the diachronic goal of maintaining a stable stock of belief we need an epistemic state with a potentially diachronic component. To be (or have been) reliably formed is such a component, since it implies something about the etiology of the belief in question—an etiology that, if repeatedly instantiated, will promote our goal to attain and maintain a stable belief set. This was exactly why we saw reason to introduce reliably believing as a value-bearer in the first place. To believe truly, however, has no diachronic component, in the sense that to believe truly at time t carries no promise to the effect that we will believe truly at $t+1$ (again, granted that we do not exclusively employ deductive methods). This is why we need to appreciate the multiplicity of value-bearing states and, particularly, why the value pertaining to instances of believing truly cannot make the value of agents believing reliably otiose. Given the diachronic character of epistemic inquiry, the intrinsic yet synchronic value of believing truly can not swamp the instrumental and diachronic value of believing reliably for the simple reason that the former can never replace the latter as a way to attain and maintain a stable belief set. Hence, we should reject (ii) and accept (4).

4. CONCLUSION

So, given premises (1) through (4), we get

$$(5) V(SK \text{ that } p) > V(SB_T \text{ that } p).^{16}$$

¹⁵ This is not to deny that they may, of course, trivially refer to the ‘same state’ in the sense that they might both be (proper) parts of a more substantial state of affairs—the most substantial one being everything there is.

Hence, if construed along the lines of (1), a virtue epistemological approach to knowledge is fully compatible with both value monism—understood in terms of (*DVM*)—and the idea that knowing is more valuable than believing truly.¹⁷

¹⁶ Duncan Pritchard (“Recent Work on Epistemic Value,” Draft 0405) distinguishes what he calls the *primary* value problem of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than true belief from the *secondary* value problem of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than any proper subset thereof (including, but not restricted to, true belief). While the argument warranting (5) serves to solve the former, it does not solve the latter. However, given that (1) holds, we see that, in order to solve the secondary problem, we only need to show that it is the case that $V(\text{SK that } p) > V(\text{SB}_R \text{ that } p)$ —the latter being the only remaining component of knowledge, apart from true belief—which we may do by recourse to the factivity of knowing (contrasted with the non-factivity of reliably believing). In other words, since knowing but not reliably believing implies believing truly, the former is more epistemically valuable than the latter.

¹⁷ Sosa has argued that, in order to solve the value problem discussed here, we also need to postulate a further intrinsic value pertaining to the truth as “gained through our own performance” and thereby “attributable to the agent as his or her own doing.” (See Sosa, “The Place of Truth in Epistemology,” p. 23.) I cannot see that this should be necessary in order to solve the particular problem at hand, even though my account—due to it not being committed to (*EVM*)—may very well be extended so as to acknowledge the presence of further intrinsic value-makers, if other considerations called for it.