

The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding, by Jonathan Kvanvig.
Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 216 pages. £60.

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It seems no surprise that most current work in the theory *of knowledge* is focused on knowledge. For all that, Jonathan Kvanvig suspects that this focus embeds a mistake. In attempting to expose and reverse this mistake, Kvanvig's book aims to do no less than redirect our thinking in epistemology.

The focus on knowledge would be justified, if knowledge of the concept of knowledge were the one thing needful in epistemology, or if it were obvious that knowledge is more valuable than anything else that epistemology is concerned with—because, for instance, knowledge had a value that transcended the values of its parts in the way that (on Kvanvig's reading) Socrates looks for, and fails to find, in Plato's *Meno*. I'll come back to the former condition shortly; Kvanvig's book begins by arguing at length that the latter one does not apply. The value of knowledge is real and positive, but not greater than the sum of the values of its parts, such as justification and true belief. Hence (I have my doubts about this “hence”, by the way), there is no good reason to take knowledge to be focal to epistemology. It might be better, Kvanvig concludes, to take some other concept as our focus. He ends by

arguing that, since *understanding* has a value that transcends the value of its constituents, therefore the concept of understanding is a good candidate for this focal role. (Again, I have my doubts about this “therefore”.)

Up to Chapter 8, Kvanvig’s argument characteristically proceeds by exclusion. Thus Chapter 1 excludes the possibility that the value of knowledge is extrinsic or instrumental. Chapters 2-4 build a story about how the value of knowledge might equal the sum of the values of its components true belief (Chapter 2) and justification (chapters 3-4). This story, however, comes to an end in Chapter 5, where Kvanvig argues that the value of knowledge can’t be explained in this additive way, for reasons to do with the Gettier problem. Then Kvanvig argues against more direct approaches to the thesis that knowledge is valuable, whether of a broadly realist kind (Chapter 6) or a broadly attitudinalist kind (Chapter 7). These exclusions in place, Kvanvig takes it that the way is clear for him to argue, more positively, that although knowledge is certainly valuable, understanding is *more* valuable, and looks a much more plausible candidate for the role of kingpin-concept in epistemology (Chapter 8).

A first thought about this strategy of argument is: Why not cut to the chase? Apparently Kvanvig’s main positive agenda is to argue that understanding, not knowledge, is the focal concept in epistemology: he will eventually argue this in a number of ways, including the rather Platonic way of showing that understanding of the concept of understanding is more necessary for epistemology than knowledge of the concept of knowledge.¹ But why the “eventually”? If this is Kvanvig’s main concern, why does he not address it straight away, instead of leaving it until the last chapter of the main argument? We’ve already seen that, among all the things that are

excluded in chapters 1-7, one thing that is *not* excluded is the thesis that knowledge is valuable; Kvanvig himself accepts that thesis. Thus, within the overall plan of the book, what the first seven chapters of the book seem to achieve is, in brief, only the conclusion that it is hard to say why knowledge is valuable, or independently valuable. Chapter 8 then goes on to show that it is easier to say why understanding is valuable, or independently valuable. Fine. But obviously enough—and of course Kvanvig himself sees this point—there is no good inference from “The value of X is easier to justify than the value of Y” to “The value of X is greater than the value of Y”. If it’s a claim of the latter sort that Kvanvig really wants to establish, with X = understanding and Y = knowledge, then it is puzzling that he should spend as much as seven chapters out of nine concentrating on claims of the former sort.

Perhaps the explanation of this puzzle is that Kvanvig’s method is Socratic. Socratic inquiries like the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus* too are, after all, typically indirect, and likely to proceed more by reviewing the alternatives and cautiously closing them off than by a *tour de force* of positive assertion. It might also be said, no doubt, that there is much preliminary work to be done to clear away our prejudices in favour of knowledge, and against understanding. And indeed one of the most valuable features of Kvanvig’s book—something that I cannot really do justice to here—is his very sharp and interesting discussions of the detail of other contemporary epistemologists’ work.

A second puzzle about the overall strategy of the book relates to Kvanvig’s discussion and eventual rejection, in chapters 2-5, of what I’ll call the additive thesis, the view that the value of knowledge equals the sum of the values of its components

true belief and justification. Kvanvig's eventual argument against this thesis is complex and ingenious; it turns on the idea that a good account of the value of knowledge is unlikely also to be a good account of the nature of knowledge, and *vice versa*. (139: "As the prospects rise for providing a counterexample-free account of the nature of knowledge, the prospects sink for providing an account of [the value of]ⁱⁱ knowledge in terms of the value of its constituents".) But it wasn't at all clear to me why a much simpler argument against the additive thesis wouldn't do the trick. Quite generally, the idea that values are neatly additive seems altogether unpromising. No one supposes that if you add the value of the taste of garlic to the value of the taste of ice cream, this will give you a good way of computing the likely or actual value of the taste of garlic-flavour ice-cream. Why then should anyone make the parallel assumption about knowledge, understood as a composite of true belief and justification? Anyone who wants to defend the additive thesis about knowledge is not arguing in a way which is routinely reliable and hence needs no special defence in its application to this case. On the contrary, this argument-schema is so routinely *unreliable* that we stand in need of a special reason for thinking that for once, in the case of knowledge and its components, the argument-schema will work. All Kvanvig needs to say against the additive thesis, it seems to me, is that the onus is on its defenders to find this special reason, and that until they do, we should assume that the additive thesis is not true.

Kvanvig's final chapters (8-9; Chapter 9 is the Conclusion) give his main argument that understanding, unlike knowledge, has a value that transcends the value of its constituents, and hence (same worries as before about this "hence") is the central concept for epistemology. Developing this main argument, he writes (205):

“Understanding... is a construction out of true belief and subjective justification of a coherentist variety”. Very well: but how does this analysis of understanding help to show that the value of understanding transcends the two values of true belief and of subjective justification?

Oddly, Kvanvig’s next sentences do not answer that question. Instead he says this (205):

Because both truth and subjective justification are valuable independently of each other and because neither value is swamped by the value of the other, we have the basis for an explanation of why understanding is more valuable than its subparts. To this basis, we add the value created by additional justified true beliefs regarding the general explanatory relationships (including logical and probabilistic relationships) that coherentists proclaim to be the defining features of justification. To have mastered such explanatory relationships is valuable because it gets us to the truth, but also because finding such relationships organises our thinking on a subject matter in a way beyond the mere addition of more true beliefs or even justified true beliefs.

I find this a puzzling passage. Kvanvig’s main thesis, remember, is that the value of understanding transcends the several values of its components. But here what Kvanvig tells us is only that truth and subjective justification are independently valuable, and that some other things (further “justified true beliefs” about “general explanatory relationships”) are independently valuable as well. They are, severally, independently valuable, because their values are not “swamped” by other values in

the offing. That is, their values are not swallowed up by the value of something else in the way that, to take Kvanvig's example (45-47), the value of reliable belief is swallowed up by the value of true belief (in the sense that the only reason for valuing *reliable* belief is because it is or tends to be *true* belief). But the question of swamping is surely irrelevant here. That the various components of understanding have values independently of each other is one claim. That understanding has a value above and beyond the values of its components is quite another. To prove the former, therefore, is not to prove the latter. And to say, as Kvanvig does, that proving the former gives us "a basis" for proving the latter is not to explain what exactly this basis is.

In any case, it comes to look, in this passage and in others, as if there is no way of settling whether or not understanding has a value that transcends the values of its components. Suppose we define understanding as Kvanvig does, as "a body of information [held by a person] together with the grasping of explanatory connections concerning that information" (200). Here it is clear that having a body of information has value, and also that grasping explanatory connections about that information has value; moreover, as Kvanvig tells us, these two components of understanding have independent values. So does understanding have a value that is greater than the combined values of these two components? I have no idea how to answer that question, and no idea what kind of argument might be used to settle it. Garlic ice-cream is back on the menu here; the problem is, as before, that in general value-relations are unpredictably organic rather than predictably additive. But even if we were to try and stabilise the debate by assuming additive predictability, it would still be quite unclear how the argument for the value of understanding, over and above the values of its constituents, would be supposed to go.

(And how—we might ask here—would it have gone for *Plato*? How would he have argued the case for thinking that the value of *epistêmê*ⁱⁱⁱ transcends the values of true belief and justification? The answer to that, I think, lies in the theory of the Forms, which I doubt Kvanvig would wish to deploy. We should also note that—at least in the *Republic*, though perhaps not in the *Meno* or the *Theaetetus*—Plato actually denies that knowledge has true belief and justification as components; I doubt Kvanvig would want to follow Plato down this road, either.)

What's more, any argument aiming at the conclusion that understanding has a value that transcends the values of its components would seem to face a serious tactical problem. This is that any factor cited as the key "factor X" to give understanding its special added value, over and above the values of its components, would itself be ripe for treatment as *another component* of understanding. (We can do this, for example, with "the organisation of our thinking" in the passage from 205 quoted above.) But if factor X too is a component of understanding, then once more the value of understanding will *not* outrun the sums of the values of its components. If this line of thought is right, then the value of understanding *cannot* be greater than the sums of the values of its components; and *pari passu*, the value of knowledge cannot be greater than the sums of the values of *its* components, either. But whether the line of thought is right is hard to tell, because of the key problem that I have been calling the garlic ice-cream problem: the intractability of values when we try to add them together.

If I am right about any or even some of this, then there are serious problems for Kvanvig's main argument. His main argument is, presumably, what a review of his book ought to focus on; but in a way this is a pity, because Kvanvig's book has many merits that are quite unaffected by problems on the main line. I have already mentioned his excellent discussions of much of the recent literature, and should also enter three cheers for Kvanvig's principal conclusions. Even if I have my doubts about Kvanvig's routes to this destination, I applaud and welcome his two most important bottom-line contentions: first that epistemologists should think more about the *value* of knowledge and other epistemic states, and second that what normative epistemology should really be after is not knowledge, but understanding.

Endnotes

ⁱ Thus, in effect, Kvanvig 186: “Attending to the relationship between knowledge and understanding can give us hope in our pursuit of special and unique value for epistemic achievements, even though we have had to give up such hope regarding the cognitive achievement of knowledge.” Cp. Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, p.66: “A better understanding of knowledge is the precondition for solving the problem of false judgement (200c-d)”.

ⁱⁱ This is my gloss, prompted by comparison with other contexts, where Kvanvig very frequently contrasts accounts of the nature with accounts of the value of knowledge. If there is a misprint here, it is not, unfortunately, the only one. (13 “Daedelus” for “Daedalus”; 30 “Buryeat” for “Burnyeat”; on 201 we have “laudatory” where the context demands “laudable”, on 108 the non-word “virtuosity”; on 193 it is

disappointing to find Cambridge University Press, of all people, misspelling the Greek *epistêmê*.)

ⁱⁱⁱ However we translate *epistêmê*. Kvanvig rightly points out (193) that “knowledge” may actually be a less accurate translation for what Plato has in mind than “understanding”. “Science” (in a broad sense, like the German *Wissenschaft*) might also be more accurate than “knowledge”.