

## Reply to René van Woudenberg

1. My first comment on RvW's fine and very creative paper is a very general *caveat*, which will apply to RvW's paper, to the book by Kvanvig that set RvW's paper in motion, and also to this Reply to RvW's paper on Kvanvig's book. The comment is: *What kind of value are we talking about?* I think both RvW and Kvanvig want to talk about value *simpliciter*, value with no subscript. I'm a little suspicious of that myself: I would want to distinguish fairly sharply between epistemic value on the one side, and ethical or practical <sup>1</sup>value on the other—if only because I think that making that distinction clear enables us to draw some big and exciting parallels (more about them towards the end of this Reply) between epistemic reasons, epistemic obligations, the epistemic good, and their practical or ethical parallels. However, RvW and Kvanvig don't seem to invest much if anything in this distinction. I merely note the point, to make sure it doesn't trip us up later; it is mainly towards the end of this Reply that the point will be important.

2. RvW argues that there is not one, there are two, Meno problems (two problems about why knowledge should be preferred to true belief). From the 1<sup>st</sup>-person perspective it's much better to have knowledge, because if I have knowledge then I'm sure to get things right. From the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person perspective it makes no difference, because true belief will get me to the right destination (Larisa, or wherever) just as surely as knowledge will.

Surely the advantage of knowledge from the IPP that RvW identifies—namely assurance—can only materialise if I *know* that I know. But I could have this assurance if I knew that I truly believed—or indeed if I truly believed that I knew, or if I truly believed that I truly believed. What's more, though I would not really have this assurance if I *falsely* believed that I knew, or if I falsely believed that I truly believed, still I would think I had it. So far forth, then, I don't see how, on R's account, knowing can give us a justified assurance that truly believing doesn't. Nor am I convinced that I would want to link the distinction between knowledge and true belief with the distinction between subjective certainty and uncertainty in the kind of way that RvW seems to.

A different claim about the relations of knowledge and true belief to assurance that we might want to make is that knowledge is more counterfactually robust than true belief: that changes in my surrounding beliefs are less likely to make me abandon what I know than what I merely truly believe. But I'm dubious about that claim too: we can and do lose knowledge when our surrounding beliefs change. (E.g. I might cease to know what time it is when someone tells me, falsely, that there's been a power cut, thus defeating my correct normal presumption that the electric clock on the wall is accurate.)

The most interesting truth in the vicinity, I think, is that any given belief is more counterfactually robust, the more it is surrounded by other beliefs that support it. But this point doesn't obviously discriminate between true belief and knowledge either. What it certainly does discriminate between—and this is important to Kvanvig's purposes—is true belief or knowledge *with*, and *without*, *understanding*. True belief or knowledge that p with understanding will be, roughly, TB or K that p, together with an account, explanation, or theory of why p: to coin a phrase, it will be TB or K that p with a *logos* of p. This *logos* will surround p with lots of other truths, interrelating all of the relevant truths in a lattice of inferential and explanatory relations; by doing this, it most certainly will add counterfactual robustness to p. So far as I can see, however, it will do this irrespective of whether p is known or truly believed. This seems to me to support Kvanvig's claim that what really matters in epistemology is understanding, not knowledge or true belief. I suppose you might also see it as support for Plato's claim that knowledge *is* understanding. At any rate it is clear from the *Theaetetus* that Plato has no time for such analyses of knowledge as the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief, not at least where "justified" means what, say, a contemporary reliabilist means by it.

3. RvW goes on to argue that the value of various examples of trivial knowledge is no greater than the value of true beliefs about the same trivia, and that such value is relative to different agents' different interests. I take it his argument here is a close relation to the familiar line of argument<sup>2</sup> that truth can't be a value in itself, because we don't seek to know as many things as possible, irrespective of their importance (to us). But that line of argument is intended to make the point that the *truth* of various propositions is of no obvious value (to us). If that point about truth is right, then certainly its corollaries will apply equally to true belief and knowledge. However, this won't be evidence that TB

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, because I don't believe in "the special moral *ought*", I have no interest or faith whatever in a sharp distinction between ethical and practical value.

<sup>2</sup> For this see Jane Heal, "The Disinterested Search for Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1987.

and K are of equal value *in general*, only that they don't differ in value *at this point*. And since the point is (as I say) a point about truth, it's not clear why we should expect K and TB to differ in value here, *whatever* we think about their relative values elsewhere.

In any case the familiar line of argument strikes me as dubious, for reasons that have interestingly to do with Kvanvig's principal theme, understanding. The familiar argument says (in effect) that truth can't be a good, because we don't promote it. Except for consequentialists, this is a plain *non sequitur*: a non-consequentialist should retort that we might as well say that the avoidance of murder can't be a good, because we don't promote the avoidance of murder by, e.g., committing one murder to prevent four. There are, obviously enough, other things to do with a value besides promoting it; we can respect it, for instance.

How might we spell out this distinction in a way that applies to truth? We can do it, I think, by noting the contrast between the following two claims (AC for alethic consequentialism, AN for alethic non-consequentialism):

(AC) For any proposition p and any believer B: if p is true, then B ought to believe p

(AN) For any proposition p and any believer B: if p is true, *and if B is permitted or obliged to have a belief whether p*, then B ought to believe p

Here (AC) is the false, indeed barking mad, thesis that is rightly rejected by the familiar line of argument against truth as a value. However, rejecting (AC) is not tantamount to rejecting the thesis that truth is a value, because (AN) is also available. (At least: there may of course be lots of other possibilities, but I won't explore these here, because I think (AN) gets things more or less completely right.) (AN) gives us a non-promoting attitude to the value of truth, in the sense that it doesn't oblige us to believe anything and everything that happens to be true; we are only obliged to believe what's true where it falls within the scope of our obligations or permissions that we should have *some* belief about a given subject-matter. (AN)'s slogan is "If you believe anything about something, then believe the truth about it". This is a way of saying that the truth is worth having, thus is a value, without saying the crazy thing that (AC) says—that we must have as much of it as possible.

Another good thing about (AN) is that it is also capable, unlike (AC), of making sense of RvW's plausible claim that there are some things it is better not to know. As RvW says, what is more valuable than knowledge is *ignorance* of the Hermetic arcana, of how to make an atomic bomb, of the contents of malicious gossip, or of what the appointment committee really said about me; not *false belief* about these matters. The claim which some might think plausible—I don't—that sometimes false belief is better than true belief, can't be squared with (AC) or (AN). It offends against (AC) by allowing us not to promote the value of truth, and against (AN) by allowing us to fail even to respect truth (assuming, as I do assume, that respecting truth as a value does mean being committed so far as possible to not having false beliefs about anything, even if it does not mean being committed to having true beliefs about everything). By contrast, the claim that sometimes *ignorance* is better than true belief (or knowledge), while it obviously can't be squared with (AC), can be squared with (AN). For (AN) obliges no one to believe anything on any topic except on the condition that he is obliged or permitted to believe something on that topic. Which is plainly consistent with the possibility that there might be some topics such that we were not only permitted to believe nothing about them, but obliged.

As for the topics that we are permitted to believe nothing about, these will no doubt be the natural habitat of RvW's category "valueless knowledge". Which will they be? No doubt that is, as RvW says, partly a matter of individuals' interests, so that what is valueless knowledge for you may not be valueless knowledge for me. Is there any knowledge that has no value for anyone? Maybe, and maybe not; what is important is to notice how we decide that knowledge is or is not of value, according to the kind of non-consequentialist normative epistemology that I would want to bring in to back up (AN). For this normative epistemology, my decisions about what knowledge or true belief to value will depend on how the acquisition of particular pieces of knowledge helps me in my particular epistemic projects of understanding, and in the overall epistemic project of seeking understanding in general. This overall epistemic project of seeking understanding is to the various epistemic values that are represented by the different truths, or constellations of truths, that we might seek to find out in our thinking as the overall ethical project of seeking happiness is to the various ethical values that are represented by the different goods, or combinations of goods, that we might seek to pursue in our living.

This parallelism between the ethical and the epistemic brings us to what I think is a very interesting conclusion: it turns out that the kingpin role that *eudaimonia* occupies in ethics is occupied in normative epistemology, not by knowledge, but by understanding. This conclusion brings me, no

doubt, rather close to the outlook favoured by Kvanvig, and also by the author of the Book of Proverbs. “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

*t.d.j.chappell@dundee.ac.uk*

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<sup>3</sup> *Proverbs 4.7* (Authorised Version).