

WHICH VALUE FOR WHAT KNOWLEDGE?

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Various recent discussions of the value of knowledge have concentrated on the so-called ‘Meno problem’, the problem of “how, and whether, knowledge has a value that exceeds that of its parts”¹. The problem is to explain the widespread assumption that knowledge is, by its very nature, always more valuable than its parts, i.e. always more valuable than, for instance, true belief. These discussions have a comparative structure in that they aim to establish the value of knowledge by trying to specify why knowledge is *more valuable* than, for instance, true belief.

These discussions are interesting in their own right. But I do think they are, in one important way, limited in their significance. For what we want to know is not just whether knowledge, compared with X or Y, is *more valuable* than X or Y. We want to know the non-comparative value of knowledge. But working on the Meno problem won’t enlighten us here. For if the widespread assumption that knowledge is indeed more valuable than its parts, could be satisfactorily explained, that still doesn’t enlighten us on the (non-comparative) value of knowledge. The fact that silver is more valuable than copper, doesn’t tell us whether silver is valuable. Likewise, the fact, if it is a fact, that knowledge is more valuable than true belief, doesn’t tell us whether knowledge is valuable.

My paper is a discussion of both comparative and non-comparative judgments about the value of knowledge. I will be arguing for the following theses:

- (1) there are two Meno problems
- (2) sometimes, but not always, knowledge has a value that exceeds the value of true belief
- (3) ignorance is sometimes more valuable than true belief
- (4) there are various non-comparative values for knowledge
- (5) there is valueless knowledge.

1. Two Meno Problems

As indicated, the Meno problem is the comparative problem of “how, and whether, knowledge has a value that exceeds that of its parts”. In a nearly book-length argument, Jonathan Kvanvig has argued that the value of knowledge does not exceed the value of true belief. In my discussion I will concentrate on the part in which Kvanvig, following Richard Swinburne’s lead², argues that knowledge is no more valuable than true belief if knowledge is reliably formed true belief. The reasoning is this. Suppose someone has the belief B, and that B happens to be true. B is either reliably formed, or unreliably formed. Which of the two is the case, however, doesn’t add or subtract from the value of B. Reliably formed true belief (i.e. according to this approach: knowledge) does not exceed the value of unreliably formed true belief, for “once truth is in the picture, its value so swamps the value of reliability that the value of reliability simply disappears”³. Hence, knowledge, construed along reliabilist lines, is no more valuable than true belief.

In order to explain the phenomenon of swamping, Kvanvig refers to an analogy used by Swinburne. It is about a beautiful piece of furniture, that is produced by a factory that

¹ Kvanvig 2003, p. xiii; also Jones 1997.

² Swinburne, 1999, pp. 57-66.

³ Kvanvig 2003, p. 47.

ordinarily produces defective pieces. The fact that this particular piece is produced by this lousy factory, doesn't subtract from its value. And had it been produced by a factory famous for its high quality furniture, that fact wouldn't *add* to its value—even though being produced by a high quality factory is a value. This value, however, is swamped by the value of being a beautiful piece of furniture. Likewise, a belief's being produced by a reliable mechanism, is a value. But that value too is swamped by the truth of the belief.

The rest of Kvanvig's argument is a generalization over this. All other proposals as to what marks the difference between true belief and knowledge engender a similar situation. Whatever it is that marks the difference, has value. But that value is swamped by the value of true belief. And hence knowledge (on whatever analysis) has a value that doesn't exceed the value of true belief.

In response to Kvanvig's solution to the Meno problem, I should like to proceed by offering two examples that suggest that Kvanvig's conclusion is false. These examples suggest that the value of knowledge exceeds the value of true belief. Then I will return to Kvanvig's argument and offer a diagnosis as to what is wrong with the argument that leads Kvanvig to his false conclusion.

My first example alludes to Plato's *Meno*. Suppose I want to go to Larissa. Then I much rather *know* the way to Larissa, than *have a belief about it* that, unbeknownst to me, happens to be *true*. Given that I want to go to Larissa, my knowing how to get there is a much more valuable state of affairs than my having a belief as to how to get there, that happens to be true. The knowledge state is more valuable than the true belief state, because the former state assures me which way to go, whereas the latter state does not. The knowledge state affords me an assurance that the true belief state does not—and this assurance is something I value highly.

Here is a second example. I feel a nagging pain in my chest and consult a doctor. Then I really prefer her to *know* my ailment than to have a *belief* about it that, unbeknownst to her, happens to be *true*. Given that I want her to proscribe me the right cure, her knowing what ails me is a more valuable state of affairs than her having a true belief about it. Why? Because when she knows, she is a much better doctor than when she has merely true beliefs. And she is much better, because when she is in the knowledge state she can give me a treatment with more assurance and conviction than when she is in the state of having a belief that happens to be true.

The first is a case in which I value *knowledge in myself* higher than having a true belief. The second is a case in which I value *knowledge in someone else* higher than having a true belief. In both cases the knowledge state is more valuable because it affords assurance and conviction—which, in these cases, are valuable commodities.

What in Kvanvig's argument makes him miss this point? What in the argument is responsible for leading to the conclusion that the value of knowledge *does not* exceed the value of true belief? My diagnosis is that it is the third person perspective from which the Meno problem is formulated that is responsible for this. The problem is "how, and whether, knowledge has a value that exceeds that of its parts", and the examples discussed are examples where we, onlookers, peep into a situation where, we are told, a subject has a belief that happens to be true. And then, by reference to the swamping problem, it is argued that in that situation the value of true belief equals the value of knowledge. And this seems to be correct. If we already know that Achilles has a true belief about how to get to Larissa, then, from our third person perspective, his true belief serves him as good as his knowing the way would have; his true belief has no less value than his knowledge. For us, onlookers, these states have equal value. But from a first person perspective, as the two examples I offered indicate, the difference is telling. For Achilles there is a vast difference between knowing the way, and having a belief about the way that happens to be true. The difference includes a

value difference, with the knowledge state being more valuable than the belief state. The difference between us onlookers and Achilles is that whereas we know that Achilles' belief is true, Achilles doesn't.

The preceding discussion, then, suggests that there are two Meno problems. One is the Third Person Perspective Meno Problem, the other the First Person Perspective Meno Problem. If Kvanvig is right, the proper response to the Third Person Perspective Meno Problem is to hold that the value of knowledge does not exceed the value of true belief. And if I am right, the proper response to the First Person Perspective Meno Problem is that (in some situations, for some people) the value of knowledge exceeds the value of true belief. And the reason for this is that knowledge has the value of affording assurance and conviction, which belief that just happens to be true lacks. So I am, in a sense, continuing a venerable tradition according to which knowledge is certain, or perhaps better, provides certainty, whereas mere belief gives us one of the shades of probability.⁴

2. Why Knowledge isn't Always More Valuable than True Belief

It has been suggested that "a satisfactory answer to the question of the value of knowledge will need to explain why knowledge is, by its very nature, more valuable than its parts [such as true belief, RvW]"⁵, that "Knowledge is always more valuable than (mere) true belief"⁶, that "every instance of knowing ... that p is more valuable than the corresponding instance of merely believing truly that p."⁷ I take these suggestions to affirm that it is true, for every proposition p, that knowing that p is more valuable than merely having the true belief that p.

I should now like to argue that this is false as it stands. For there are many true propositions such that knowing them is not in any way more valuable than believing them. I may know that my neighbor lost his left shoe on Monday October, 2, 1936 between 10.00 and 10.15 a.m. For me being in this state is no more valuable than believing this (supposedly true) proposition. I can think of many trivia, many trivial things that I happen to know, but that are such that my knowing them is no more valuable than merely having true beliefs about them. Here are some more examples:

- (a) that Jane felt bad that it rained yesterday
- (b) that the oldest man now living lives in Russia
- (c) that many more newspaper articles begin with an A than a C.

Let us assume for the sake of the argument that this triad of propositions is true—and that I am in the knowledge state with respect to each of them. According to the suggestion we are considering, being in this state is more valuable than being in the state of believing them. But suppose that Jane is someone I know only very vaguely, that her feelings are of no concern to me, and that I have no obligation, morally or otherwise, to try to keep her mind free from feelings of sadness. In that case I can't see why my knowing that Jane felt bad that it rained yesterday is a state that should be valued higher than my simply having the (true) belief that she had that feeling. Of course, for someone else Jane's well-being may be of great importance, and for that person *knowing* Jane's feelings may be a much better state to be in than having merely true beliefs about them. For knowing her feelings will enable that person to care for Jane in a more effective way than if he only held true beliefs about her feelings.

⁴ Plato, Locke.

⁵ Kvanvig 2003, p.xiv.

⁶ Riggs 2002, p. 79.

⁷ Riggs 2002, p. 81.

For as I said in the previous section knowledge gives us an assurance and steadfastness that belief that just happens to be true does not.

With respect to the other propositions similar points can be made. Although for me knowing them has no more value than merely believing them, it is possible to envisage situations in which knowing them *is* more valuable than merely believing them. Medical doctors, investigating optimality conditions for aging, will value knowing where the oldest man in the world now lives over merely having a true belief about it. And linguists, intent on investigating frequencies of first letters in newspaper articles, will value knowing that A's are used more often than C's over having a true belief about it.

The point I am making, then, is that whether knowledge of *p* is to be valued higher than having the true belief that *p*, depends on the epistemic subject and on what is important to her. If proposition *p* is an important proposition to *S*, then *S*'s knowing it is more valuable than *S*'s merely having the true belief that *p*. And if *p* is trivial to *S*, then it is *not* more valuable than *S*'s merely having the true belief that *p*. So what I am saying is that the comparative value of knowing that *p*, depends on the person relative importance of *p* to *S*. Which implies that the state of knowing *as such* is not to be valued over the state of merely having a true belief. It all depends on the importance of *p* to *S*.

So far I have been saying that there are propositions such that for some subjects the value of knowing them does not exceed the value of having mere true beliefs about them. But I make bold that we should make the further claim that in some cases not-knowing that *p* is more valuable than holding the merely true belief that *p*. There are things so intimately related to the life of others, thing so bad or vile, or perhaps not vile nor bad but nevertheless such that I should not want to know them—that holding true beliefs about them is worse than ignorance about them. What I am saying is that there is forbidden knowledge, knowledge we should not have, knowledge we should not crave for, knowledge we should shun, and that lack of such knowledge is a more valuable state to be in than having true beliefs about the topics or subjects involved. What I am saying is that there is sometimes, for some persons, with respect to some propositions blissful ignorance. We may, for example, get knowledge from gossip⁸, but such knowledge may not exceed the value of mere true belief. In fact, blissful ignorance may be more valuable than true belief. For having the belief may pollute one's mind.

The remarks just made, once found firm expression in the Dutch 15th century *Devotio Moderna* movement, a religious movement founded by the Geert Grote that was very much concerned with the well-being of the soul.⁹ Geert Grote, and his follower Thomas á Kempis, held that the limitless acquisition of knowledge is without value, or worse, it may mean a threat to one's spiritual well-being. Having said that, I am not going to elaborate on this at this point, since in this part of my paper I am exclusively concerned with the *comparative* value of knowledge, while the remarks of the *Devotio Moderna* spokesmen regard its non-comparative value.

To sum up this section, I have been arguing that knowledge isn't always more valuable than mere true belief by (i) adducing examples that show that the comparative value of knowledge is person-relative, i.e. that there are cases where knowledge is not more valuable than mere true belief for you but not for me, and by (ii) suggesting that in cases of forbidden knowledge, knowledge is to be valued less than true belief, and true belief less than ignorance.

⁸ Meeker 1997.

⁹ see Van Engen 1988 for a general introduction into this movement. It does not contain, however, material on the value of knowledge. For this one should consult part 1 of á Kempis *Imitatio Christi*. This movement considers curiosity a vice, and, by implication, all knowledge that may result from this motivation.

3. Complication: ‘Knowledge’ has Many Senses

Up to this point I have been talking about ‘knowledge’ as if we all know what knowledge is. But we don’t. The discussion about the proper analysis of knowledge has brought no consensus. Surely, most epistemologists agree that true belief is necessary but insufficient for knowledge. And most of them even agree that what needs to be added to true belief in order to get knowledge is an anti-luck condition. But here consensus breaks down, and we find a bewildering array of proposals as to the shape and content of this condition. It has been argued that knowledge is true belief

- [a] that is held with certainty
- [b] that is such that the subject has been able to eliminate all sceptical alternatives to it.
- [c] that the subject has adequate evidence (reasons, grounds ...) for
- [d] that is based on adequate evidence
- [e] that is formed by a sufficiently reliable belief-forming process
- [f] that was formed by the proper functioning of one’s cognitive faculties
- [g] that was formed by the exercise of an intellectual virtue
- [h] that is rational in one of its many senses
- [i] that is justified and satisfies an anti-Gettier condition
- [j] that is such that the subject has cognitive access to the evidence
- [k] that the subject cannot be blamed for having
- [l] that is formed responsibly
- [m] that coheres with a large body of one’s other beliefs.

How is it possible that philosophers who have thought very hard about the analysis of knowledge come up with such a flowering manyfold of proposals? Two explanations commend it self. First, the topic is so extraordinary difficult, that it is no wonder that no consensus (or near consensus) has been reached so far. But since there is a truth of the matter, sustained efforts will in the end deliver the final analysis of knowledge that everybody, or nearly everybody, will agree on. The other explanation is that there just isn’t one target that all epistemologists have had their eyes on when they were discussing knowledge. There simply isn’t one thing called ‘knowledge’. Instead, there is a plurality of states that have all been referred to by the word ‘knowing’ or ‘knowledge’. That word is polysemious, it has many, perhaps related, meanings. The word ‘knows’ in such sentences as “S knows that ...” doesn’t have *one* meaning but rather *different* meanings—it names rather *different* mental states.

In another paper I have argued in favor of the second explanation.¹⁰ I won’t repeat the arguments given, but I will now proceed to consider the question how to think about the (comparative) value of knowledge if one assumes that my arguments are succesful, or anyways my conclusion correct. So what I will do now is consider a small sampling of ‘knowledge states’ picked out by diverse analyses of knowledge, and see what the value of that state is compared with the state of having a mere true belief. In order not to get distracted before I am well on my way, I will put the conclusions of the previous section about forbidden knowledge and trivia to one side, and for the time being proceed on the widely held assumption mentioned earlier that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

First I will turn to simple reliabilism, according to which a person knows that p, provided the belief that p is generated by a de facto reliable belief producing mechanism. Is ‘knowing’ p in the sense of having the reliably formed true belief that p more valuable than

¹⁰ Van Woudenberg (2005).

having the mere true belief that p? We have encountered Kvanvig's answer. He thinks that because the value of being the product of a reliable mechanism is swamped by the value of true belief, the value of knowledge (the state picked out the reliabilist's analysis of knowledge) does not exceed the value of true belief. Now I should think that this *may be* correct, but only if one construes the Meno problem from a first person perspective. From a first person perspective there seems to be no extra value in reliabilist knowledge. For suppose I form the true belief that Sam is sane, then *for me* no value is added when the belief is produced by a reliable mechanism. After all, I have no awareness of the reliability of the mechanism. (I said that Kvanvig's reply to the First Person Perspective *may be* right. For there is some space for doubting this. Reliabilist knowledge may, after all, afford steadfastness and assurance to the subject which mere true belief will not. In such cases even from a first person perspective there will be a difference). But when we shift from the first to the third person perspective, then the extra value of knowledge (construed along reliabilist lines) comes in full focus. For from a third person perspective the situation in which someone forms a true belief through the operation of a reliable mechanism (and hence has 'knowledge' in one sense) is more valuable than a situation in which someone has a true belief through the operation of an unreliable mechanism such as guessing, or wishful thinking, or drawing astrological charts. From a first person perspective the value of a cup of really good coffee does not sink when it is produced by a machine that usually puts out lousy drinks—for it tastes fantastic. But from a third person perspective there is more value in a situation in which a machine consistently puts out really good coffee, than in a situation in which a machine only incidentally does.

Next I turn to the theory according to which a person knows that p, provided his true belief is based on adequate evidence, where evidence is something that the person has access to. Is knowing p (construed along these lines) more valuable than believing p, in a situation where p happens to be true? From a first person perspective this surely seems to be the case. The example I used in section 1 illustrates this nicely: if I know (in the sense intended here) the way to Larissa, then my knowledge has a value that exceeds the value of merely having a true belief about it. For I have *evidence* for my belief, evidence that indicates to me that my belief is true, which gives me assurance and guidance that would be lacking if I only had a belief about the way that, unbeknownst to me, happened to be true. And also from a third person perspective it would seem that the state referred to by 'knowledge' has a value that exceeds the value of merely believing something that happens to be true.

[To be continued. Main idea: show how distinguishing the two Meno problems sheds interesting light on the comparative value of knowledge]

4. Non-comparative Values for Knowledge

So far I have been dealing with the comparative value of knowledge—the value knowledge has in comparison with mere true belief. In this section I am going to leave that topic behind in a twofold respect. First, I am going to deal with what I call the non-comparative value of knowledge, i.e. the value knowledge may have irrespective of how it compares to the value of true belief. Second, I am going to look at *what* the value of knowledge is, and argue that there isn't just one such thing as 'the' value of knowledge.

As to the first point. Even if, contrary to what I have been arguing, knowledge in all of its senses has a value that does not exceed the value of mere true belief, nothing much has been said about the value of knowledge. Even if platinum hasn't more value than diamonds, that doesn't say much about the value of platinum. It is a general principle, it seems to me, that the comparative value of X and Y has no implication as to the non-comparative value of

X or Y. And it is also a general principle, it seems to me, that if one has established the comparative value of X and Y, nothing much follows as to the non-comparative value of X and Y. (By “establishing the comparative value” I mean passing a true judgement of the sort “ $X =_v Y$ ” [X and Y have equal value] and “ $X >_v Y$ ” [X is more valuable than Y]). I am relying here on intuitions that could be countered. For one could think that a judgement of the sort “ $X >_v Y$ ” can only be reached once one has established the non-comparative value of X as well as the non-comparative value of Y, and finally has compared these non-comparative values.

The discussion of the Meno problem that I have been referring to, however, indicates that my intuitions are widely shared. For although Kvanvig reaches the conclusion that knowledge has no value that exceeds the value of true belief, he doesn’t get there by, first, establishing the non-comparative value of knowledge, then, second, establishing the non-comparative value of true belief, and then, finally, comparing these non-comparative values. It is comparison all the way. But as I have intimated a few times now, making a comparative value judgement has no implication as to the non-comparative value of the items compared.

But what *is* the non-comparative value of knowledge, and why should we assume there is only *one* such value? I will answer the first question, by answering the second. And I will answer the second question by laying out a number of values, or to be more accurate: by laying out a number of *types* of values that knowledge may have.¹¹

Let me start by making the obvious point that some knowledge is valuable because of its usefulness or utility. This type of value is often referred to as ‘instrumental value’. If knowledge has this type of value, it means that knowledge is a means to a good end. If I have to get to Larissa and I know how to get there, then my knowledge is valuable because it is useful to me. If I have a headache and I know that aspirin will cure that sort of pain, then my knowledge serves me well. If I need to speak with the Dean of my department, and I know that Henk is the Dean, then my knowledge is valuable because I can use it in order to get to the person I need. To get the full picture we need to be aware of the fact that not all knowledge has this value, for not all knowledge (or, not all knowledge in all situations) is useful. Furthermore we need to note that usefulness is a person-relative value. For knowing how to get to Larissa may be useful for me, but not for you.

The examples given indicate that ‘usefulness’ and ‘utility’ denote a whole class of specific values. One’s knowledge may be useful because it enables one to find one’s way to Larissa, or serves one well in treating an ailment, or helps one to address the right person, and there is no end to the ends that may be served by having knowledge.

Utility, then, is a value knowledge may have. But utility may also be a vice of knowledge. There are, as we know too well, bad ends that may be served by one’s knowledge. Knowing what causes pain helps torturers ply their trade. Knowing that smallpox was deadly to the native populations aided North American immigrants in destroying those populations. So utility is a person-relative virtue, and only so if it serves a good cause.

Another familiar type of value that one’s knowledge may have is structurally opposed to instrumental value. One’s knowledge may also have ‘final value’, by which I mean that possessing it is desirable as an end for its own sake. Many people are interested in genealogy, they value knowing who their ancestors were and how they lived, what their opinions and convictions were, etc. but in many cases their knowledge has no utility, is no means to a good end. They simply want to know for the sake of knowing. Knowing *these were my fathers* may be a final value. There is no end to what types of knowledge can have final value for people. Knowing one’s ancestry, knowing how the book ends, knowing how many planets our solar system has, knowing the name of William the Silent’s favorite dog, knowing how many

¹¹ Here I am indebted to Kirschenmann 2001 and Lewis 1946.

slaves were transported by Dutch vessels in the 17th century, knowing the fertility system of orchids.

Final value, as is instrumental value, is a person relative affair. For me knowing my ancestry may be valuable for its own sake, but for you it may not. And knowledge that has final value for me, may have instrumental value for you. For me knowing the fertility system of orchids may have final value, but for you it may be instrumental in conducting various breeding experiments.

Knowledge, then, may have final value for one. But, as the writers of the *Devotio Moderna* remind us, one may find certain knowledge desirable that should not be desired. One may desire knowledge of what is forbidden. Obvious examples would be all sorts of intimacies and private matters of others, and more controversial, knowledge of the occult. If knowledge is to have final value, therefore, it should not only be because it is desired for its own sake, but also because it is *worth* to be desired for its own sake.

The types of values I have discussed so far by no means exhaust the field. I should now like to point to a what seems to me to be a radically other type of value for knowledge. I will first introduce the general type, and then specify an important sub species of it. There are, it seems to me, values a thing has because it helps maintaining a good state of affairs, or a good practice—where these things cannot be considered just as means to good ends, nor as having final value. Such values can be baptised *functional values*. Speaking a language has this kind of value, for speaking a language helps maintaining communal life, which is a good state of affairs. It would be wrong to say that speaking a language is valuable just because it is a means to the end of getting messages across (knowing a language has not just final value either). *Knowledge* can have functional value. Think of knowing your way to and through your house; knowing one's spouse and children, and knowing what they hope and fear, like and abhor; knowing where the police office is located and what sorts of things you can consult the police for; knowing what a democracy is and how it works, knowing one's constitutional rights and obligations. None of this knowledge can, without strain, be thought of as having just instrumental value. The knowledge indicated isn't just a means to obtain certain goals: knowing one's house, and knowing where it is located, isn't just valuable because it enables one to find one's house, and find one's way inside of it. This knowledge isn't just instrumental, it is functional in that it contributes to maintaining the practice of *living, or habitating*, which too is a good state of affairs. Likewise, knowing one's spouse isn't valuable just because it enables one to reach certain goals, it is valuable because it helps maintaining marital life, which is a good thing as well. Such knowledge has what I call functional value. And again, knowing what democracy is and how it works, is valuable, but not just because it helps one's realizing certain goals. It is valuable because it enables a good state of affairs to continue.

Another type of value I should like to introduce is a subtype of functional values. Some functional values are *necessary* or *essential* for maintaining a certain good practice, or a valuable activity in the sense that they are constitutive of that practice, or activity. They could therefore be called constitutive values. Some knowledge has constitutive value. If one wants to be a member of a particular political party, one needs to know how it is organized. Would no one know how the party is organized, then the life of the party has come to an end. One's knowledge of such matters has constitutive value, by which I mean that such knowledge is constitutive, or necessary, or essential, for the party to exist. It seems to me that trading companies, educational institutions, universities, governments, sporting clubs and virtually all associations that have an institutional character require for their very existence all sorts of knowledge—or, to be more precise, these associations cannot exist without the existence of

persons whose knowledge is constitutive of the association and whose knowledge has what I dubbed constitutive value.¹²

These, I maintain, are some non-comparative values that knowledge may have.

5. Conclusion: Valueless knowledge

These non-comparative values give us something to go on when we want to see which knowledge is without value.

[to be continued]

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¹² Relevant for these points are Goldman 1999, and Kusch 2002.