

## THE SEARCH FOR THE SOURCE OF EPISTEMIC GOOD

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI

---

**ABSTRACT:** Knowledge has almost always been treated as good, better than mere true belief, but it is remarkably difficult to explain what it is about knowledge that makes it better. I call this “the value problem.” I have previously argued that most forms of reliabilism cannot handle the value problem. In this article I argue that the value problem is more general than a problem for reliabilism, infecting a host of different theories, including some that are internalist. An additional problem is that not all instances of true belief seem to be good on balance, so even if a given instance of knowing  $p$  is better than merely truly believing  $p$ , not all instances of knowing will be good enough to explain why knowledge has received so much attention in the history of philosophy. The article aims to answer two questions: (1) What makes knowing  $p$  better than merely truly believing  $p$ ? The answer involves an exploration of the connection between believing and the agency of the knower. Knowing is an act in which the knower gets credit for achieving truth. (2) What makes some instances of knowing good enough to make the investigation of knowledge worthy of so much attention? The answer involves the connection between the good of believing truths of certain kinds and a good life. In the best kinds of knowing, the knower not only gets credit for getting the truth but also gets credit for getting a desirable truth. The kind of value that makes knowledge a fitting object of extensive philosophical inquiry is not independent of moral value and the wider values of a good life.

Keywords: epistemology, reliabilism, value, virtues.

---

Philosophers have traditionally regarded knowledge as a highly valuable epistemic state, perhaps even one of the great goods of life. At a minimum, it is thought to be more valuable than true belief. Contemporary proposals on the nature of knowledge, however, make it difficult to understand why knowledge is good enough to have received so much attention in the history of philosophy. Some of the most common theories cannot even explain why knowledge is better than true belief. I propose that the search for the source of epistemic value reveals some constraints on the way knowledge can be defined. I believe it will also show that the common view that epistemic good is independent of moral good is largely an illusion.

### 1. What Makes Knowledge Better Than True Belief?

It is almost always taken for granted that knowledge is good, better than true belief *simpliciter*, but it is remarkably difficult to explain what it is

about knowledge that makes it better. I call this “the value problem.”<sup>1</sup> I have previously argued that most forms of reliabilism have a particularly hard time handling the value problem.<sup>2</sup> According to standard reliabilist models, knowledge is true belief that is the output of reliable belief-forming processes or faculties. But the reliability of the source of a belief cannot explain the difference in value between knowledge and true belief. One reason it cannot do so is that reliability per se has no value or disvalue. A reliable espresso maker is good because espresso is good. A reliable water-dripping faucet is not good because dripping water is not good. The good of the product makes the reliability of the source that produces it good, but the reliability of the source does not then give the product an additional boost of value. The liquid in this cup is not improved by the fact that it comes from a reliable espresso maker. If the espresso tastes good, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable machine. If the flower garden is beautiful, it makes no difference if it was planted by an unreliable gardener. If the book is fascinating, it makes no difference if it was written by an unreliable author. If the belief is true, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable belief-producing source.

This point applies to any source of a belief, whether it be a process, faculty, virtue, skill – any cause of belief whose value is thought to confer value on the true belief that is its product, and which is thought to confer value because of its reliability. If knowledge is true belief arising out of the exercise of good traits and skills, it cannot be the reliability of the agent’s traits and skills that adds the value. Those traits or skills must be good for some reason that does not wholly derive from the good of the product they produce: true belief. As reliabilism has matured, the location of reliability has shifted from processes to faculties to agents.<sup>3</sup> There are advantages in this progression, but if the good-making feature of a belief-forming process or faculty or agent is only its reliability, then these versions of reliabilism all share the same problem; being the product of a reliable faculty or agent does not add value to the product.<sup>4</sup> Hence, if knowledge arises from something like intellectual virtue or intellectually virtuous acts, what makes an intellectual trait good, and hence a virtue, cannot be simply that

<sup>1</sup> For an exception to the almost universal view that knowledge is a better state than true belief, see Sartwell 1992. This move displaces the problem to that of identifying the value of true belief, which will be addressed in the second section.

<sup>2</sup> I mention the value problem briefly in Zagzebski 1996 and discuss it in some detail in Zagzebski 2000. Another version of the value problem is proposed in DePaul 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Sosa’s earlier theory is what I call faculty reliabilism. Greco has a theory he calls agent reliabilism. In Greco 1999, he uses the term *agent reliabilism* for a class of theories beyond his own, including Sosa’s, Plantinga’s, and my early theory.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, reliabilists usually have particular faculties and properties of agents in mind, properties they call virtues, e.g., a good memory, keen eyesight, and well-developed powers of reasoning. The goodness of these virtues is not limited to their reliability, and so long as that is recognised, the theory has a way out of the value problem. But for the same reason, it is misleading to call these theories forms of reliabilism.

it reliably leads to true belief. This, then, is the first moral of the value problem: *Truth plus a reliable source of truth cannot explain the value of knowledge.*

It follows that there must be a value in the cause of a true belief that is independent of reliability or truth conduciveness, whether we call it virtue or something else. Suppose we succeed in identifying such a value. Is that sufficient to solve the value problem? Unfortunately, it is not, so long as we think of knowledge as the external product of a good cause. A cup of espresso is not made better by the fact that the machine that produces it is valuable, even when that value is independent of the value of good-tasting espresso. What the espresso analogy shows is not only that a reliable cause does not confer value on its effect but also that there is a general problem in attributing value to an effect because of its causes, even if the value of the cause is independent of the value of the effect. I am not suggesting that a cause can never confer value on its effect. Sometimes cause and effect have an internal connection, such as that between motive and act, which I shall discuss in a moment. My point is just that the value of a cause does not transfer to its effect automatically, and certainly not on the model of an effect as the output of the cause. So even if the cause of true belief has an independent value, that still does not tell us what makes knowledge better than true belief if knowledge is true belief that is good in some way other than its truth. The second moral of the value problem, then, is this: *Truth plus an independently valuable source cannot explain the value of knowledge.*

It follows from the second moral that to solve the value problem it is not enough to find another value in the course of analysing knowledge; one needs to find another value in the right place. Consider Alvin Plantinga's theory of warrant as proper function. A properly functioning machine does not confer value on its product any more than a reliable one does. The problem is not that proper function is not a good thing but that it is not a value in the knowing state itself. The first two morals of the value problem, then, reveal a deeper problem. We cannot explain what makes knowledge more valuable than true belief if we persist in using the machine-product model of belief that is so common in epistemological discourse.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge cannot be identified with the state of true belief that is the output of a valuable cause, whether or not the cause has a value independent of the value of true belief.<sup>6</sup>

In other work I have proposed that in a state of knowledge the agent gets to the truth because of the virtuous features of her belief-forming activity.<sup>7</sup> Wayne Riggs and John Greco's response to the value problem is

<sup>5</sup> The machine-product model has been used by Alston, Plantinga, Sosa, Goldman, and others. The word *output* is frequently used, and some of them illustrate their discussion with analogies of machines and their products.

<sup>6</sup> My colleague Wayne Riggs has thought of the location issue as a way out of the value problem. See Riggs 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Zagzebski 1996, part 3.

that the extra value of knowing in addition to true belief is the state of affairs of the epistemic agent's getting credit for the truth that is acquired.<sup>8</sup> Ernest Sosa's response to the value problem is similar. He says that in a state of knowing, the truth is attributable to the agent as his or her own doing.<sup>9</sup> These approaches clearly are similar, but they solve the value problem only if we reject the machine-product model of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> For the same reason that the espresso in a cup is not made better by the fact that it is produced by a reliable espresso maker or a properly functioning espresso maker, it does not get any better if the machine gets credit for producing the espresso. That is to say, the coffee in the cup does not taste any better.

The conclusion is that true belief arising from cognitive activity cannot be like espresso coming out of an espresso maker. Not only is the reliability of the machine insufficient to make the coffee in the cup any better; nothing about the machine makes the product any better. So if knowledge is true belief that is made better by something, knowledge cannot be the external product of the believer in the way the cup of espresso is the external product of the machine.

Let us look at the idea that knowing has something to do with the agent getting credit for the truth, that she gets to the truth because of something about her as a knowing agent – her virtues or virtuous acts. There are theoretical motives for this idea that have nothing to do with the value problem, such as the proposal that it avoids Gettier problems,<sup>11</sup> so it is supported by other constraints on the account of knowledge. But my concern in this article is the way this move can solve the value problem. If I am right that knowing is not an output of the agent, it must be a state of the agent. I am not suggesting that this is the only alternative to the machine-product model,<sup>12</sup> but if we think of a belief as part of the agent, the belief can get evaluative properties from features of the agent in the same way that acts get evaluative properties from the agent. In fact, the idea that in a state of knowing the agent gets credit for getting the truth suggests that her epistemic state is attached to her in the same way her acts

<sup>8</sup> See Riggs (1998) and Greco (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> See Sosa (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> So far as I can tell, Greco and Riggs reject the machine-product model, but Sosa uses it repeatedly, including in Sosa forthcoming, the article in which he proposes his way out of the value problem.

<sup>11</sup> I argued this in Zagzebski 1996. See also Riggs (1998) and Greco (forthcoming). DePaul 2001, note 7, argues that Gettier cases produce another form of the value problem, because we think that the value of the agent's epistemic state in Gettier cases is not as valuable as the state of knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> Another alternative is that knowledge is identified with the entire process culminating in the belief, and it gets value from the value in the process as well as the truth of the end product of the process. I have proposed that it would serve the purposes of Sosa's account of epistemic value to think of knowledge as an organic unity in the sense used by Franz Brentano and G. E. Moore. That would permit the value of the whole to exceed the value of the sum of the parts. See Zagzebski (forthcoming b). DePaul (2001, section 6) also discusses the possibility that knowledge is an organic unity.

are attached to her. An act is not a product of an agent but is a part of the agent, and the agent gets credit or discredit for an act because of features of the agent. In particular, an agent gets credit for certain good features of an act, for example, its good consequences or the fact that it follows a moral principle – because of features of the act that derive directly from the agent – for example, its intention or its motive. If believing is like acting, we have a model for the way the agent can get credit for the truth of a belief because of features of the belief that derive from the agent. I propose, then, that this is the third moral of the value problem: *Knowing is related to the knower not as product to machine but as act to agent.*<sup>13</sup>

The value problem arises for a group of theories wider than those that are reliabilist or even externalist. Internalists generally do not think of a true belief as the product of what justifies it, and so they accept the first part of the third moral. Nonetheless, some of them are vulnerable to the first moral of the value problem because they analyse justification in such a way that its value is explained by its truth conduciveness. Laurence Bonjour does this explicitly in the following passage:

The basic role of justification is that of a *means* to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our objective goal. . . . If epistemic justification were not conducive to truth in this way, if finding epistemically justified beliefs did not substantially increase the likelihood of finding true ones, then epistemic justification would be irrelevant to our main cognitive goal and of dubious worth. It is only if we have some reason for thinking that epistemic justification constitutes a path to truth that we as cognitive beings have any motive for preferring epistemically justified beliefs to epistemically unjustified ones. Epistemic justification is therefore in the final analysis only an instrumental value, not an intrinsic one. (Bonjour 1985, 7–8)<sup>14</sup>

Notice that in this passage Bonjour understands the value of justification the same way the reliabilist does, as something that is good because it is truth conducive. The internality of justification has nothing to do with its value on Bonjour's account. But as we have seen, if the feature that converts true belief into knowledge is good just because of its conduciveness to truth, we are left without an explanation of why knowing *p* is better than merely truly believing *p*. And this is the case whether or not that feature is accessible to the consciousness of the believer. Bonjour does not appeal to the machine-product model, and so the problem in his case is more subtle than it is for the reliabilist. Nonetheless, the problem is there, because a true belief does not gain any additional good property from justification. In contrast, the traditional account of knowledge as justified true belief does not have the value problem, because the justifying beliefs do

<sup>13</sup> I explore the requirement of agency in knowledge in Zagzebski 2001.

<sup>14</sup> DePaul (1993, chap. 2) insightfully discusses the problem of Bonjour and others in explaining the value of knowledge. I thank DePaul for bringing this passage to my attention.

not or do not simply produce the belief that is a candidate for knowledge. Instead, they give it a property, justifiedness. They make *it* justified. The conclusion is that if knowing *p* is better than truly believing *p*, there must be something other than the truth of *p* that *makes believing p better*. My proposal is that if believing is like acting, it can be made better by certain properties of the agent.

Consider a few of the ways an act acquires properties because of features of the agent. The class of acts subject to moral evaluation has traditionally been called the voluntary. A voluntary act is an act for which the agent gets credit or blame. The voluntary includes some acts that are intentional and some that are non-intentional. Acts that are voluntary but non-intentional can be motivated, and perhaps always are. My position is that acts of believing are generally in the category of acts that are voluntary but non-intentional, although for the purposes of this article it is not necessary that this position be accepted. What is important is just the idea that beliefs can be and perhaps typically are motivated, and that the motive can affect the evaluation of the belief in a way that is analogous to the way the motive can affect the evaluation of an overt act.

What I mean by a motive is an affective state that initiates and directs action. In my theory of emotion, a motive is an emotion that is operating to produce action. The appreciation for a value is an emotion that can initiate and direct action. When it does, it is a motive in the sense I mean. Acts motivated by appreciation of a value may not be intentional even when they are voluntary. My thesis is that, other things being equal, acts motivated by love of some value are highly valuable.<sup>15</sup>

As I analyse virtue, a motive disposition is a component of a virtue. A virtuous act is an act motivated by the motive of some virtue *V* and is characteristic of acts motivated by *V* in the circumstances in question.<sup>16</sup> An act can be compassionate, courageous, or generous, or unfair, cruel, and so on. The name of the virtue or vice out of which an act is done is typically given by the name of the motive out of which it is done, and the motive is a feature of the agent who performs the act. If believing is like acting, it can be virtuous or vicious. The properties of true believing that make it better than mere true believing are properties that it obtains from the agent in the same way good acts obtain evaluative properties from the

<sup>15</sup> I also think that acts motivated by love of some value are more valuable than those that *aim* at the same value but without the motive of love or appreciation for the value. So some nonintentional acts have moral value because they arise from a good motive. In contrast, some intentional acts may aim at a good end but have less value because they do not arise from a good motive. I discuss this in more detail in Zagzebski forthcoming a.

<sup>16</sup> In Zagzebski 1996 I distinguish a virtuous act from an act of virtue. Unlike the latter, a virtuous act need not be successful in its aim. I use *act of virtue* as a term of art to identify an act good in every respect. It is an act that arises out of a virtuous motive, is an act a virtuous person would characteristically do in the circumstances, is successful in reaching the aim of the virtuous motive, and does so because of the other virtuous features of the act.

agent. In particular, a belief can acquire value from its motive, in addition to the value it may have in being true.

The idea that to know is to act is not very common these days, although it has a lot of precedent in philosophical history.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the word *judge* is used to distinguish that which can be converted into knowledge from belief, which is commonly understood as a disposition or a passive state rather than as an act. I shall continue to use the word *believe* to refer to an act since I think it is an acceptable use of the term, but some readers might find the substitution of the word *judge* in what follows clearer.

What motives of the agent could make believing better? I have previously argued that it is motives that are forms of the basic motive of love of truth.<sup>18</sup> The motivational components of the individual intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness or intellectual fairness or intellectual thoroughness or caution differ, but they are all based on a general love or valuing of truth or a disvaluing of falsehood.<sup>19</sup> The motivational components of the intellectual virtues are probably more complex than this since, for example, intellectual fairness may consist in part in respect for others as well as in respect or love of truth.<sup>20</sup> But love of truth is plausibly the primary motive underlying a wide range of intellectual virtues.<sup>21</sup> If love of truth is a good motive, it would add value to the intellectual acts it motivates.

What sort of value does love of truth have? Assuming that if something is valuable it is also valuable to appreciate or love it, then love of true belief has value because true belief has value. But the motive of love of truth also derives value from distinctively moral motives. That is because moral permissibility, praise, and blame rest on epistemic permissibility, praise, and blame.<sup>22</sup>

Let me propose a condition for impermissibility. When something of moral importance is at stake when someone performs an act *S*, then if *S* is

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas and other medieval philosophers seem to have thought of knowing as involving an act of intellect. There may be passages in Plato that suggest this also. See Benson 2000, chap. 9.

<sup>18</sup> I argue this in Zagzebski 1996, part 2, and in more detail in Zagzebski forthcoming a.

<sup>19</sup> I have argued in Zagzebski forthcoming a that loving truth is not the same as hating falsehood, but I do not think the difference makes a difference to the point of this article.

<sup>20</sup> Respect, love, and appreciation in most contexts are quite different, but I do not think the differences make much of a difference in the context of an emotional attitude towards truth. Since most epistemologists do not think *any* emotional attitude towards truth makes any difference to epistemic status, it is quite enough to try to show that one of these attitudes makes a difference.

<sup>21</sup> Some intellectual virtues may aim at understanding rather than truth. I argue that epistemologists have generally neglected the value of understanding in Zagzebski 2001b§. See also Riggs forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> The *locus classicus* for discussion of the connection between the moral permissibility of acts and the permissibility of beliefs is Clifford's article, "The Ethics of Belief." W. K. Clifford concludes that an unjustified belief is morally impermissible. See also Montmarquet 1993 for a good discussion of the relation between the permissibility of acts and beliefs.

<sup>23</sup> The issue of what is involved in epistemic permissibility is a difficult one, because

a case of acting on a belief *B*, it is morally important that *B* be true. It is, therefore, impermissible for the agent to believe in a way that fails to respect the importance of the truth of *B*. That implies that the agent must believe out of certain motives. In particular, I suggest that the agent's motives must be such that they include a valuing of truth or, at a minimum, that they do not involve a devaluing or neglect of truth.<sup>23</sup>

If moral blameworthiness rests on epistemic blameworthiness, then the same reasoning leads to the conclusion that moral praiseworthiness or credit rests on epistemic praiseworthiness or credit.<sup>24</sup> Suppose now that an act *S* is a case of acting on a belief *B* and that act *S* is an instance of an act type that is morally praiseworthy in the right conditions. I propose that act *S* is credited to the agent only if the truth of belief *B* is credited to the agent. So if knowing *B* is something like truly believing when the truth of *B* is credited to the agent, it follows that the agent gets moral credit for an act *S* based on belief *B* only if *S* knows *B*.<sup>25</sup>

Suppose also that I am right that there is a motivational requirement for getting credit for the truth that involves love of truth. It follows that the motive of love of truth is a requirement for love of moral goods, or at least is a requirement for love of those moral goods for which one gets praise or blame in one's acts. The praiseworthiness of love of truth is a condition for moral praiseworthiness. There is, therefore, a moral motive to have knowledge. The value that converts true believing into knowing is a condition for the moral value of acts that depend upon the belief.

In spite of the moral importance of having true beliefs, we usually think that true belief is good in itself. The value of true belief is a distinctively epistemic value that allegedly permits epistemologists to treat the domain of belief and knowledge as something independent of acts subject to moral evaluation. This brings us to the deeper value problem of knowledge: In what sense, if any, is true belief good? If true believing is not good, we

of the 'ought implies can' rule. But unless we are willing to say that no belief is impermissible, there must be some things we ought and ought not to believe, so the 'ought implies can' rule does not prohibit us from speaking of epistemic permissibility. I am not going to discuss the extent to which we can control each of our beliefs. My point is just that so long as we do think there are acts of belief that are impermissible, it follows that either we have whatever power over believing is intended in the 'ought implies can' rule or else the 'ought implies can' rule does not apply to these beliefs. In other words, I think the intuition that impermissibility applies in the realm of belief is stronger than the 'ought implies can' rule.

<sup>24</sup> Praiseworthiness differs somewhat from credit in most people's vocabulary, in that deserving praise is a stronger commendation than deserving credit. I think the difference is only one of degree and do not believe that much hangs on the difference.

<sup>25</sup> There is no doubt a variety of qualifications to be made here. For example, the agent generally gets credit of some kind for *S* even when *B* is false so long as her intellectual motive sufficiently respects the importance of the truth of *B*, she does what intellectually virtuous persons characteristically do in her circumstances, and her belief is only false because of her bad luck.

<sup>26</sup> DePaul 2001, 179. DePaul also uses the example of a commercial for a financial insti-



have a much more serious problem than that of finding the value that makes knowing better than true believing.

## 2. The Value of True Belief

I have been treating knowledge as something the knower earns. It is a state in which the prize of truth is credited to her; perhaps she is even deserving of praise for it. But why should we think that? I have already mentioned that this idea was developed because it avoids Gettier problems, but that objective is surely only a small part of the task of defining knowledge. Knowledge is worth discussing because it is worth having. But the fact that knowledge is valuable does not force us to think of it as something we earn or get credit for or are responsible for or praised for, although that way of looking at it follows from the sports analogies used in discussions of the value problem by Sosa, Greco, and Riggs, and from the analogy of winning a battle used by Michael DePaul.<sup>26</sup> They all treat knowledge as an achievement or points earned in a game rather than the blessings of good fortune. I think they are right about that, but it is worth mentioning that the fact that knowing is a valuable state does not force us to think of it in that way. Some goods are just as good if we do not have to work for them – for example, good health and a safe environment – and some may even be better if we do not have to work for them – for example, love and friendship. Good health, safety, love, and friendship are all good in the sense of the desirable. The sense of good that we earn or get credit for is the sense of good as the admirable. I have argued that if we think of knowing as being like acting, it is the sort of thing that can be virtuous or vicious, which is to say, admirable or reprehensible. Knowledge is admirable. But surely knowledge is also desirable because its primary component, true belief, is thought to be desirable. That is to say, we think that true belief is good *for us*.

True belief may be desirable, but it is certainly not admirable. It is not something for which we get credit or praise. That is, true belief by itself does not carry credit with it, although I have said that in cases of knowing we get credit for the truth because of other features of the belief. The kind of value that makes knowing better than true believing is the admirable, whereas the kind of value true believing has is the desirable. But now we encounter a problem, because surely not all true beliefs are desirable. For one thing, many people have pointed out that some truths are trivial. This is a problem for the value of knowledge, because even if knowing a trivial truth is better than merely truly believing it, how much

tution in which a pompous gentleman announces, “We make money the old-fashioned way: we earn it.” The implication is that it is better to get money by working for it rather than by luck or inheritance. As DePaul points out, that implies that there is something valuable in addition to the money itself.

<sup>27</sup> See Sosa 2001.

better can it be? There is only so much good that knowing a trivial truth can have. If it is fundamentally valueless to have a true belief about the number of times the word *the* is used in a McDonald's commercial, it is also valueless to know it. So even if trivial truths are believed in the most highly virtuous, skilful, rational, or justified way, the triviality of the truth makes the knowing of such truths trivial as well. The unavoidable conclusion is that some knowledge is not good for us. Some might even be bad for us. It can be bad for the agent and it can be bad for others – for example, knowing exactly what the surgeon is doing to my leg when he is removing a skin cancer; knowing the neighbour's private life. It follows that either not all knowledge is desirable or some true beliefs cannot be converted into knowledge.

A common response to this problem is to say that truth is conditionally valuable. It is not true belief per se that is valuable but having the answer to our questions. Our interests determine the difference between valuable true beliefs and nonvaluable or disvaluable ones. Sosa gives the example of counting grains of sand on the beach. He says that we do not think that believing the outcome of such a count has value, because it does not serve any of our interests.<sup>27</sup> But, of course, somebody *might* be interested in the number of grains of sand on the beach, yet it seems to me that knowing the count does not get any better if he is. If a truth is trivial, believing it is not improved by the fact that the epistemic agent has peculiar or perverse interests. In fact, the interests may even make it worse, because we add the perversity of the interests to the triviality of the truth.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps we can appeal to the idea of importance to save the intuition that our interests and goals have something to do with the truths that are valuable to us, by making the value more significant.<sup>29</sup> Maybe some things are just important *simpliciter*, where that means there are truths whose importance is not reducible to what is important to so-and-so. Perhaps there are degrees of distance from the individual in the concept of importance, where some things are important to people in a certain role or in a certain society, and some are important to everybody. But I don't think this move will help us. There are no important 'truths' if a truth is a true proposition, since propositions are not important in themselves, and if truth is a property of propositions, truth is not what is important. Instead, it is the state of truly believing the proposition that is important. So when we say that some truths are important and others are not, what we really mean is that some true *beliefs* are important and others are not. And then to say this means no more than that the value of true beliefs varies. But we already knew that. What we want to know is what makes them vary. The idea of

<sup>28</sup> In addition to Sosa, Christopher Stephens uses our interests as a way to resolve the problem of the two values – getting truth and avoiding falsehood. Goldman 2001 identifies interest as a value that unifies the epistemic virtues.

<sup>29</sup> This idea is briefly discussed by Riggs (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> See Foley 2001. Foley seems to be content with allowing the value of the goal to be

important true beliefs is just another way of posing the problem. It is not a solution to the problem.

Another form of conditional value is instrumental value. It has been argued that satisfaction of our desires or reaching our goals is what reason aims at. True belief is surely a means to reaching our ends, most of which are non-epistemic. A good example of this position is that of Richard Foley, who argues that the epistemic goal of truth is instrumentally valuable as a means to other goals, whose value is left undetermined.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, many true beliefs have instrumental value, but instrumental value is a form of conditional value, since the condition for the value of the means is the value of the end. If the end is disvaluable, so is the means.<sup>31</sup> Conditional value is like a suspected terrorist: someone who is a suspected terrorist may not be a terrorist, and a belief that has conditional value may not have value. No form of conditional value possessed by true belief has the consequence that all true beliefs are valuable.

There is still the possibility that true belief has intrinsic value. Perhaps every true belief has some intrinsic value simply in virtue of being true, whether or not it is good for us. That may well be the case, but I do not see that it will have the consequence that every true belief is valuable on balance, because intrinsicity is unrelated to degree. Intrinsicity pertains to the source of a belief, not to its amount. So even if every true belief has some intrinsic value, it is unlikely that the intrinsic value of every true belief is great enough to outweigh the undesirability or other negative value some true beliefs have from other sources.

The inescapable conclusion is that not every true belief is good, all things considered. Whether we are considering admirability or desirability, or an intrinsic or extrinsic source of value, on balance it is likely that there are some true beliefs that have no value and probably some that have negative value.

Now consider what follows for the value of knowing. In the first section I concluded that knowing is better than true believing only if it is true believing in which the agent gets credit for getting the truth. But if a given true belief is not valuable, how can the agent get credit for it if the truth in that case is not such that it is something someone should be given credit for? So long as some true beliefs are disvaluable, it makes just as much sense to say she is blamed for the truth as that she is praised for it. Assuming that every true belief is intrinsically good, it is good that the agent gets credited with the truth because of what is admirable about the agent's epistemic behaviour – her intellectually virtuous motives and acts. But the truth credited to her may not be much of a prize.

set by the agent.

<sup>31</sup> A given means could serve more than one end. I would think that the value of a means in a particular case is determined by its end in that case. This is compatible with a means of that type having value when it serves some other end that is good.

Consider also what happens to my proposal that knowledge is better than true belief because it is a case in which the truth is reached by intellectually virtuous motives and acts, the value of which can be traced back to the value of the motive of valuing truth. But if the truth in some cases is not valuable on balance, why should we be motivated to value it? Of course, we are assuming that true belief has some intrinsic value, and we can also assume that true belief is usually good for us, in which case it is reasonable to think that it is good to value it *as* something with some intrinsic value, however slight, as well as something that is usually good for us. But if we are looking for a value that has the potential to be a significant good, we still have not found it.

What is more, so long as some true beliefs are not desirable, the agent's getting the truth can be credited to her even though the agent's getting a *desirable* truth is not credited to her. And even when the truth *is* desirable, it may be a matter of luck that she got a desirable truth rather than an undesirable one. I think this leads us into a problem parallel to the Gettier problem. Gettier cases arise when there is an accidental connection between the admirability of a belief and its truth. Similarly, it is possible that there is an accidental connection between the admirability of a belief and its desirability. I think it is too strong to deny such cases the label of knowledge; nonetheless, they are not as good as they can be. They are not the best instances of knowledge, not the ones that are great goods. The solution to Gettier cases is to close the gap between the admirability of a belief and its truth. The solution to the new value problem is to close the gap between the admirability of a true belief and its desirability. To get a truly interesting value in knowledge, therefore, it should turn out that in some cases of knowing, not only is the truth of the belief credited to the agent but the desirability of the true belief is also credited to the agent. This is a general formula that can be filled out in different ways, just as the formula for the definition of knowledge can be filled out in different ways, depending upon the theorist's conception of credit, and that in turn depends upon a general theory of agent evaluation. In the next section I shall outline the contours of a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that satisfies the constraints identified in the first two sections of the article.

### 3. Knowledge, Motives, and *Eudaimonia*

I have claimed that good motives add value to the acts they motivate, and this includes epistemic acts. Motives are complex, and I have not investigated them very far in this article, but a feature of motives that is relevant to our present concern is that they themselves are often motivated by higher-order motives. Higher-order motives are important because they keep our motivational structure compact and aid us in making first-order motives consistent. If good motives can confer value on the acts they motivate, it follows that higher-order motives can confer value on the lower-order

motives they motivate the agent to acquire. As we are looking for an additional source of value in some cases of knowledge, it is reasonable to look at the source of the value of the motive of true believing in the particular cases of knowing that are more valuable than ordinary knowing.

We have already seen at least two ways in which the valuing of truth in particular cases is required by other things we value. That is, we have a motive to have the motive for truth because of other good motives. First, if something of moral importance is at stake when we perform an act and that act depends upon the truth of a certain belief, then it is morally important that the belief be true. The motive for true belief in such cases is motivated by the higher-order motive to be moral or to live a good life. Second, since true belief is a means to most practical ends, the motive to value truth in some domain is motivated by the motive of valuing those ends, which is in turn motivated by the desire to have a good life. I propose that the higher-order motive to have a good life includes the motive to have certain other motives, including the motive to value truth in certain domains. The higher-order motive motivates the agent to have the motives that are constituents of the moral and intellectual virtues, and in this way it connects the moral and intellectual virtues together. If knowledge is true belief credited to the agent because of its place in her motivational structure, it gets value not only from the truth motive but also from the higher-order motive that motivates the agent to value truth in some domain or on some occasion. And that motive has nothing to do with epistemic value in particular; it is a component of the motive to live a good life.

My proposal, then, is this. An epistemic agent gets credit for getting a true belief when she arrives at a true belief because of her virtuous intellectual acts motivated by a love of truth. She gets credit for getting a desirable true belief when she arrives at a desirable true belief because of acts motivated by love of true beliefs that are components of a good life. The motive for desirable true beliefs is not the full explanation for the agent's getting credit for acquiring a desirable true belief, for the same reason that the motive for true belief is not the full explanation for the agent's getting credit for acquiring a true belief, but my position is that motives are primary causes of the other valuable features of cognitive activity. When the agent succeeds in getting a desirable true belief because of her admirable intellectual motives, there is a non-accidental connection between the admirability of a belief and its desirability. That connection avoids the parallel to Gettier problems that I mentioned above, and it results in some instances of knowledge being a great good.

Let me review the various ways a belief can be good.

- (1) All true beliefs probably have some intrinsic value simply in virtue of being true whether or not they are good for us. When the truth is credited to the agent, the belief is also admirable. That is knowledge.

- (2) Some true beliefs are good for us; they are desirable. They can be desirable whether or not they are admirable. But some true beliefs are undesirable. It is also possible that some false beliefs are desirable, but I have not discussed those cases in this article.
- (3) Admirable beliefs are those that are virtuous. Admirable beliefs can be false.
- (4) Some true beliefs are both desirable and admirable. The most interesting cases are those in which there is a connection between their admirability and their desirability. A belief is admirable, and given its admirability, it is no accident that the agent has a desirable true belief. These are the most highly valuable instances of knowledge.

The problems we have encountered with the value of true belief indicate, I think, that the standard approach to identifying the value of knowledge is the wrong way round. The issue should be not what is added to true belief to make it valuable enough to be knowledge but what is added to virtuous believing to make it knowledge. And, of course, the answer to that question is obvious: It must be true. When we approach the value problem in this way, the harder question is answered first and the easier one second. That is not the usual order, but I think it is the right one. If we begin in the usual way, by starting with true belief, we are starting with something that may have no value of any kind, neither admirability nor desirability. Furthermore, by starting with the value of virtuous believing we can explain why even false virtuously motivated belief is admirable.

Let me conclude by briefly considering what makes virtue in general a good thing. Suppose that Aristotle is right in thinking of virtuous acts as components of *eudaimonia*, a life of flourishing. If I am also right that believing is a form of acting, it follows that virtuous believings are components of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is a challenging concept to elucidate for many reasons, but one aspect that contemporary commentators find particularly troublesome is Aristotle's apparent idea that *eudaimonia* fuses the admirable with the desirable. Nobody disputes the conception of *eudaimonia* as a desirable life; in fact, *eudaimonia* is generally defined as a desirable life. It then has to be argued that virtuous – that is, admirable-activity is a component of the desirable life. And that, of course, is hotly disputed. The same problem arises over the value of knowing. Nobody is likely to dispute the claim that some true beliefs are desirable. What can be disputed is whether beliefs that are intellectually virtuous, either in the way I have described or in some other, are also components of a desirable life. The question Why should we want to have admirable beliefs? is really no different from the question Why should we want to do admirable acts? If virtuous acts are desirable, it is because it is more desirable to act in an admirable way. Similarly, if knowing a proposition is more desirable than truly believing it, it is because it is more desirable to believe in an admirable way. But I can see no way to defend that without a general

account of eudaimonia, or a good life. That means that the debates currently going on in virtue ethics on the relation between virtuous activity and the good life are relevant to an understanding of an intellectually good life as well as to an understanding of a life that is good *simpliciter*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The question What is knowledge? is not independent of the question Why do we value knowledge? For those who consider the former question prior, compare the pair of questions What is knowledge? and Can we get it? It is common for anti-sceptic naturalistic epistemologists to say that whatever knowledge is, it has to be defined as something we have. We are not interested in a non-existent phenomenon. I say that knowledge has to be defined as something we value. We are not interested in a phenomenon with little or no value. It is possible that no phenomenon roughly coinciding with what has traditionally been called knowledge has the value I have been looking for in this article. If so, we would have to move to an Error theory like that of J. L. Mackie in ethics. But I do not yet see that this will be necessary, since it is possible to give an account of knowledge that both satisfies the usual contemporary constraints and identifies a phenomenon with interesting value. I also think we should conclude that if knowledge is a state worthy of the sustained attention it has received throughout the history of philosophy, it is because its value goes well beyond the epistemic value of truth and what conduces to true belief. Knowledge is important because it is intimately connected to moral value and the wider values of a good life. It is very unlikely that epistemic value in any interesting sense is autonomous.

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Oklahoma  
455 W. Lindsey, Room 605  
Norman, OK 73019  
USA  
lzagzebski@ou.edu*

#### Acknowledgements

I thank Philip Percival, my commentator at the conference at the University of Stirling, for his interesting and helpful comments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the University of California, Riverside, Tulane University, the University of Oklahoma, and the Eastern Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, December 2001. I thank the audiences at those presentations. Particular thanks go to my commentator at the APA session, Michael DePaul, for his help in improving the article.

## References

- Benson, Hugh. 2000. *Socratic Wisdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BonJour, Laurence. 1985. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- DePaul, Michael. 1993. *Balance and Refinement*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. “Value Monism in Epistemology.” In *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*, edited by Matthias Steup. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foley, Richard. 2001. “The Foundational Role of Epistemology in a General Theory of Rationality.” In *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, Alvin. 2001. “The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues.” In *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greco, John. 1999. “Agent Reliabilism.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 273–96.
- . Forthcoming. “Knowledge as Credit for True Belief.” In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Montmarquet, James. 1993. *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Riggs, Wayne. 1998. “What Are the ‘Chances’ of Being Justified?” *Monist* 81: 452–72.
- . 2002. “Reliability and the Value of Knowledge.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64, no. 1 (January): 79–96.
- . Forthcoming. “Understanding Virtue and the Virtue of Understanding.” In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartwell, Crispin. 1992. “Knowledge is Merely True Belief.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28: 157–65.
- Sosa, Ernest. 2001. “For the Love of Truth?” In *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . Forthcoming. “The Place of Truth in Epistemology.” In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, Linda. 1996. *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.



- Zagzebski, Linda. 2000. "From Reliabilism to Virtue Epistemology." In *Knowledge, Belief, and Character*, edited by Guy Axtell. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- . 2001a. "Must Knowers Be Agents?" In *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001b. "Recovering Understanding." In *Knowledge, Truth, and Obligation*, edited by Matthias Steup. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . Forthcoming a. "Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth." In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . Forthcoming b. "Epistemic Value Monism." In *Sosa and His Critics*, edited by John Greco. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.