

## The Value of Knowledge

### I. The *Meno* Problem(s)

Many people have an intuition that something like the following is true:

(Slogan) “Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.”

The problem of accounting for the sense in which this is true, if indeed it is true, has come to be known as “the *Meno* problem” or “the value problem.”

This problem is both of intrinsic interest, and of interest because many accounts of the nature of knowledge (most famously, reliabilism) have a difficult time solving it.

Some distinctions:

- “Is (Slogan) [or something like it] true?”  
 vs. “Why is (Slogan) [or something like it] true?”  
 vs. “What follows from the fact that (Slogan) [or something like it] is true?”
- “X is more valuable than Y” (= “X has more value than Y” = “X is better than Y”)  
 vs. “We value X more than Y”

[I put forward that, when these two pull apart, the former is of more interest than the latter.]

- “X is epistemically valuable” (= “X has distinctively epistemic value”)  
 vs. “X is prudentially valuable”  
 vs. “X is morally valuable”  
 vs. “X is all-things-considered valuable” (= “X is valuable when every way in which X could be valuable is weighed against one another”)
- “X has final value” (= “X is valuable as an end in itself”)  
 vs. “X has instrumental value” (= “X is valuable as a means to some other valuable end”)
- “X has intrinsic value” (= “X is valuable in virtue of its intrinsic properties”)  
 vs. “X has extrinsic value” (= “X is valuable in virtue of its extrinsic properties”)

[I put forward that this distinction is not of much interest in the current context, since (except in special cases) a belief is true in virtue of its extrinsic properties, so not even true beliefs have intrinsic value in general.]

- “X is always more valuable than Y”  
 vs. “X is more valuable than Y” (where this is a generic, like “Cats have four legs”)  
 vs. “X is typically more valuable than Y” (= “X is normally more valuable than Y”)  
 vs. “X is, other things being equal, more valuable than Y” (= “X is *ceteris paribus* more valuable than Y”)
- “Knowledge is more valuable than true belief”  
 vs. “Knowledge is more valuable than justified, true belief”  
 vs. “Knowledge is more valuable than any of its proper parts”  
 vs. “Knowledge is more valuable than anything else epistemic”

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Is it true that} \\ \text{Why is it true that} \\ \text{What follows from the fact that} \end{array} \right\} \text{knowledge is } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{always} \\ \text{generically} \\ \text{typically} \\ \text{ceteris paribus} \\ \text{< omit >} \end{array} \right\} \text{more } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{epistemically} \\ \text{prudentially} \\ \text{morally} \\ \text{all things considered} \\ \text{< omit >} \end{array} \right\} \text{valuable } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{as an end} \\ \text{as a means} \\ \text{< omit >} \end{array} \right\} \text{than } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{true belief} \\ \text{justified, true belief} \\ \text{any of its proper parts} \\ \text{anything else epistemic} \end{array} \right\} ?$$

## II. The Swamping Argument against Reliabilism

Zagzebski argues that reliabilism is unable to solve the value problem, and for that reason should be rejected.

*simplified reliabilism about knowledge* (henceforth: “reliabilism”):

S knows that  $p$  iff:

- a. S believes that  $p$ ;
- b. it is true that  $p$ ; and
- c. the process by which S’s belief that  $p$  was formed is reliable (i.e. it tends to yield a sufficiently high ratio of true to false beliefs when used in circumstances sufficiently similar to the current one).

This is “simplified” in three ways: (i) most reliabilists distinguish between *belief-dependent* and *belief-independent* processes; (ii) most reliabilists take into account the processes by which a belief is *sustained* (in addition to the processes by which it *was formed*); and (iii) most reliabilists include a *fourth condition* to handle Gettier cases.

Here is the intuitive idea behind Zagzebski’s argument:

“A great-tasting cup of coffee is valuable. And an espresso machine that reliably produces great-tasting cups of coffee is valuable. But if a certain cup of coffee tastes great, it makes no difference whether it was produced by a reliable espresso machine: no value is added to it by its causal origins.

So, too, in the case of reliabilism: if a belief is true, no value is added to that belief by the fact that it was produced by a reliable belief-forming process. Thus reliabilism cannot account for the fact that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.”

There is a suppressed premise in Zagzebski’s argument. It is not always true that the causal origins of an entity are irrelevant to its value. (For example, maybe the fact that a book was printed on a Gutenberg press adds to its value.)

What Zagzebski needs is an additional premise to the effect that true belief (and the avoidance of false belief) is all that ultimately matters in the epistemic realm:

*veritism*: True beliefs have final epistemic value;  
false beliefs have final epistemic disvalue;  
and nothing else has final epistemic value or disvalue.

With that in mind, here is one way of glossing Zagzebski’s argument, where  $B_r$  is a given reliably-produced true belief that  $p$ , and  $B_t$  is a corresponding merely true belief that  $p$ :

- P1. If  $B_r$  is more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$ , then either  $B_r$  is more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$  as an end, or  $B_r$  is more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$  as a means. [*premise*]
- P2. If veritism is true, then  $B_r$  is not more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$  as an end. [*premise*]
- P3. If veritism is true, then the fact that  $B_r$  was reliably produced doesn’t add instrumental epistemic value to  $B_r$  (since it is true). [*premise*]
- C1. So, if veritism is true, then  $B_r$  is not more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$  as a means. [*follows from P3*]
- C2. So, if veritism is true, then  $B_r$  is not more epistemically valuable than  $B_t$ . [*follows from P2, C1*]
- P4. If reliabilism is true, then  $B_r$  is an instance of knowledge. [*premise*]
- C3. So, if reliabilism and veritism are both true, it’s not the case that knowledge is always more epistemically valuable than mere true belief. [*follows from C2 and P4*]
- P5. Knowledge is always more epistemically valuable than mere true belief. [*premise*]
- C4. So, either reliabilism is false, or veritism is false (or both). [*follows from C3 and P5*]

Very similar arguments have been offered against reliabilism by Michael DePaul (1988, 1993), Ward Jones (1997), Jonathan Kvanvig (1998, 2003), Richard Swinburne (1999, 2000), and Wayne Riggs (2002).

This argument has come to be known as “the swamping argument.” The intuitive idea is that the value, for a given belief, of being reliably produced is “swamped” by the value of being true.

However, this is a bad name for Zagzebski’s version of the argument. Presumably Zagzebski thinks that the value of a reliable belief-forming process doesn’t transfer to its output belief even in cases in which that belief is false. (A bad cup of coffee is not better because it was produced by a reliable espresso machine.) So on Zagzebski’s version of the argument, there is nothing to be swamped.

### III. Zagzebski on the Machine-Product Model

Zagzebski takes her argument to refute not just reliabilism, but a whole host of theories of knowledge. According to Zagzebski, any theory that makes the following assumption falls prey to her argument:

*the machine-product model of belief/knowledge:* The view that knowledge is constituted by a belief state that is the *output* or *product* of a belief-forming process, mechanism, or faculty.

[It’s revealing that Zagzebski switches back and forth between calling this a “model of belief” and calling it a “model of knowledge”; apparently she’s making the assumption which Williams argued against, namely that knowledge is a type of belief.]

Zagzebski insists that, rather than thinking of knowledge *as an output of the agent*, we need to think of knowledge *as a state of the agent* if we are to solve the value problem. [Why are these exclusive options?]

*Zagzebski’s alternative model:* The knowledge-making features of a true belief contribute toward its value in the same way in which a *good motive* contributes toward the value of an *act*.

*note #1:* This is only an alternative if we reject *the machine-product model of how acts relate to motives*.

*note #2:* It is controversial whether a good motive ever contributes toward the value of an act.

According to some authors, motives/intentions are not relevant to the normative status of actions. According to other authors (for example, many contemporary Kantians), one’s motives are relevant, but they don’t have a bearing on the normative status of the act itself; rather, they impact the normative status of a certain complex entity, an act-done-for-a-reason [= an action].

### IV. Goldman & Olsson’s Conditional-Probability Reply

Goldman & Olsson offer two independent replies to the swamping argument on behalf of reliabilism.

The second reply strikes me as hopeless. (At best it explains why we *value* reliabilist knowledge more than mere true belief, not why the former is more *valuable* than the latter, and even then there are problems with the details.) So I focus here on the first reply, which runs as follows:

*the conditional-probability reply:*

Other things being equal, the probability of *S’s having more true beliefs of a similar kind in the future* (= F) is greater conditional on *S’s having a reliably produced true belief that p* (= R) than conditional on *S’s merely truly believing that p* (= M).

$$\Pr(F|R) > \Pr(F|M)$$

Moreover, the property of *making it more likely that one’s future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true* is an epistemically valuable property (assuming the truth of veritism).

Thus, other thing being equal, the composite state of affairs in which *S has a true belief that p and that belief is reliably produced* is more epistemically valuable than the state of affairs in which *S merely truly believes that p*.

What conditions are needed for it to be the case that other things are equal and hence  $\Pr(F|R) > \Pr(F|M)$ ? Goldman & Olsson list four:

*non-uniqueness*: S is likely to face problems in the future that are similar to the problem that led her to form a belief that  $p$ .

*cross-temporal access*: The belief-forming method that led S to form a belief that  $p$  is likely to be available to her again in the future.

*learning*: S is likely, if it is available, to use the belief-forming method that led her to form a belief that  $p$  when she faces similar problems in the future.

*generality*: The reliable belief-forming method that led S to form a belief that  $p$  will continue to be reliable in the future.

Two worries about this reply:

1. Showing that a composite state of affairs consisting of *S's true belief and the process by which it was formed* has a certain value seems to miss the point; rather, what we wanted to show was that *the belief itself* is more valuable when it possesses the property of being formed via a reliable process.

After all, Zagzebski never denies that reliable belief-forming processes have value; rather, what she denies is that any value they might have transfers to their outputs.

Moreover, it'd be crazy to insist that a cup of coffee that possesses the property of *being five feet away from a Vermeer painting* is more valuable than a cup of coffee that doesn't, since the composite state of affairs consisting of the first cup of coffee and the Vermeer is more valuable than the state of affairs consisting merely of the second cup of coffee.

*two replies on Goldman & Olsson's behalf:*

- i. Insist that *the belief itself*, when reliably produced, has the property of probabilizing F.
  - ii. Reformulate reliabilism so that the object of epistemic assessment is not a belief, but a <belief, process that formed it> ordered pair. [Compare: Kantians who insist that the object of moral assessment is not an act, but an <act, end> ordered pair.]
2. Probabilizing a valuable state of affairs isn't enough to make a thing valuable; in addition, it needs to be the case that the thing in question *helps bring about* the valuable state of affairs.

For example, the probability that *I have a million dollars in the bank* is greater given that *there exists an ATM receipt stating that I have a million dollars in the bank* than it otherwise would be, but this doesn't show that the ATM receipt itself is valuable. [Compare Kolodny on effectiveness and probabilization at his recent talk at Harvard.]

Does either *S's belief that p* or <*S's belief that p, the (token) process that formed it*> (see reply to first worry) help make it the case that F is true, when the belief is true and the process is reliable?

Plausibly "yes," but not for the reasons Goldman & Olsson give.

They focus on cases in which, in the future, S forms a true belief in a similar proposition using the same process type that S used in forming her belief that  $p$ . But in most such cases, S's (token) belief that  $p$  and the (token) process that resulted in it do not play a causal role in the production of this other true belief.

What they could say instead is that, if S's belief that  $p$  was formed *and is sustained* by a reliable process, then S is more likely to continue to hold this true belief and to use that true belief to form many other true beliefs. So the one true belief helps bring about other true beliefs.

[Note: this makes Goldman & Olsson's 1st reply to the value problem very similar to Plato's, except it focuses on the *final epistemic value* of these additional true beliefs, rather than their *instrumental prudential value*.]