

Why Deflationist Theories of Knowledge Deserve Consideration

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The swamping problem

The original formulation of the problem

Socrates: If a man knew the way to Larissa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not be a good guide?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And a person who had the right opinion as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might also be a good guide, might he not?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And presumably as long as he has the right opinion, he will be just as good a guide as the one who knows ☐ if he believes the truth instead of knowing it.

Meno: Just as good.

Socrates: Hence true opinion is as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is... (*Meno*, 97a-c)

The swamping problem

What is 'swamping'?

If the traveller desires to go to Larissa, in any case when the subject merely had true opinion (i.e., believed truly) and not known the way to Larissa, the traveller still goes to Larissa if they act based on their true belief.

Why should the traveller *care* if they know or merely truly believe when they arrive at Larissa? Their desire is to *go to* Larissa, not *know* the direction of Larissa. Knowledge was *instrumentally valuable* only insofar as it lead the traveller to Larissa.

More generally, the instrumental value of knowledge is 'swamped' by the instrumental value of mere true belief.

The swamping problem

Plato's solution

So long as they stay with us, [true beliefs] are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one ties them down by working out the cause [aitias logismo]. That process, my dear Meno, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. (Meno 97e-98a)

The swamping problem

Plato's solution, cont.

*Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable.
That is why knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. What
distinguishes one from the other is the tether. (Meno, 98a)*

The swamping problem

Plato's solution: An analysis

Socrates appears to be saying that...

1. Understanding why true opinion (*doxa*) is true makes true opinion more durable or stable (i.e., we are more psychologically fixed to or confident in our belief).

This reply matches up to epistemic double-luck: The traveller believes falsely both that Larissa is South and that the Sun rises in the West will change course upon learning the Sun rises in the East (Williamson 2000, p. 78).

2. This understanding is knowledge (*episteme*). Thus, knowledge is stable while mere true opinion is like one of Daedalus' fabled statues: Liable to run away and be lost.
3. The stability of knowledge is what makes it more valuable than mere true opinion.

Call this *Plato's stability theory*.

The swamping problem

Problems with Plato's stability theory

1. True opinion (*doxa*) can be as stable as knowledge (*episteme*) (e.g., 'common sense', convictions, delusions...)
2. Knowledge is often as unstable as true opinion (e.g., What did you eat for breakfast yesterday? You once knew, but now you don't.)

The swamping problem

Problems with Plato's stability theory, cont.

Plato's stability theory is therefore unconvincing.

In light of the failure of 'fixing' or 'stabilising' belief from change, *is* knowledge more valuable than true opinion?

If knowledge is more valuable than true opinion, *why* is knowledge more valuable than true opinion?

The value problem

The secondary value problem

The swamping problem is often referred to as the *primary value problem*: The swamping problem is in fact one of many problems that target the value of knowledge. For example...

1. Since Gettier (1963), justified true belief (JTB) is understood to be insufficient for knowledge: JTB is *not* knowledge. JTB is also (presumably) more valuable than TB.
2. What value is there to knowledge that is over and above the value of JTB?

The secondary value problem: What value is there in knowledge over and above any proper subset of its parts?

Instrumental value and knowledge

A problem for reliabilism

Zagzebski (2003) presents a difficulty for reliabilist theories of knowledge. Two great cups of coffee are identical in every respect to their taste, smell, quantity, and so on. They are both great cups of coffee. Since coffee-drinkers value great cups of coffee, reliable coffee-making machines are also valuable. The only difference between the cups of coffee is how they were brewed.

One coffee-making machine is reliable while the other is not. But there isn't any additional value added to the great cup of coffee brewed by the reliable coffee-making machine, since both cups of coffee are equally preferred by coffee-drinkers. Any value granted by the reliable coffee-making machine beyond a means to achieve the goal of a great cup of coffee isn't added to the value of the cup of coffee.

Instrumental value and knowledge

Extending Zagzebski's problem

Matt believes truly that the keys are at the National Maritime Museum by method M , but in all close possible worlds Matt left the keys are at the Cutty Sark and Matt believes the keys are at the National Maritime Museum.

Matt believes that the keys are at the National Maritime Museum by method M and in close possible worlds the keys are also at the National Maritime Museum and Matt believes the keys are at the National Maritime Museum.

Instrumental value and knowledge

Extending Zagzebski's problem, cont.

Both believe truly that the keys are at the National Maritime Museum by method M and will look in the right part of Greenwich for the keys. The goal of finding his keys is satisfied in both cases by performing the same sort of action (namely going to the National Maritime Museum and inquiring at the lost and found desk) based on the same belief, but in one there is knowledge and in the other mere true belief.

Therefore, the instrumental value of knowledge may appear to grant value over and above non-knowledge in many cases; however, upon further inspection it does not grant value over and above non-knowledge in *all* cases.

One response to the value problem

Final value

Instrumental value is not the right sort of value of knowledge has that the value of any proper subset of knowledge lacks.

The value of knowledge is *final*: Knowledge is valuable for its own sake. The value is not discovered in what is known but in the *knower*.

One response to the value problem

Pritchard's anti-luck virtue epistemology

A conjecture: There is a final value to knowledge that the value of true belief lacks, even though this value is non-instrumental.

One possible final value: There is a cognitive achievement that the knower has secured that the mere true believer due to luck lacks.

The two necessary conditions for one theory of final value are present in Pritchard's anti-luck virtue epistemology (2011; Cf. Hyman 2010): (1) A subject exercises an ability; (2) the subject is in a suitable environment that permits the exercising of the ability.

A problem for Pritchard

Wrong priorities?

There is something wrong if a subject focuses on a desire to exercise his abilities if the abilities are not exercised in the pursuit of accomplishing some goal.

Fred sees a lost dog outside a Tesco's and is motivated by a desire not to relieve the suffering of the lost dog by taking him in but by a desire to be virtuous. In order to be virtuous, Fred takes in the dog. By desiring to be virtuous, Fred focuses on furthering his own virtuous aspects rather than alleviating the suffering of the lost dog.

A problem for Pritchard

Wrong priorities?, cont.

There is something wrong in focusing on a desire to be virtuous rather than alleviating suffering. Fred's priorities are not in order. The focus should be towards the lost dog, not towards Fred.

By analogy, if knowledge is the primary goal of inquiry, then inquiry is too self-involved or misdirected. When inquiring about whether P is true or false, the focus should not be on oneself but on whether P is true or false (i.e., the traveller wants to go to Larissa, not put their intellectual house in order).

Expanding the problem

A fork

In this way, there is a fork present:

1. If the value of X is its help in determining whether P is true or false, the value is instrumental.
2. If the value of X is not its help in determining whether P is true or false but a final value, X can be exercised in environments that lead to mere true beliefs.

The problem for Pritchard: What is the final value of knowledge over and above the final value of true beliefs acquired by exercising one's abilities?

Expanding the problem

A fork, cont.

In cases when the subject lacks the abilities due to environmental factors producing bad luck, the final value of exercising one's abilities is satisfied, though the abilities are undercut by environmental factors (e.g., cases of epistemic double-luck).

Do false beliefs and mere true beliefs have final value so long as they are acquired through ability? This conclusion is undesirable, since the question remains: What is the final value of *knowledge* over and above the final value of false belief acquired through ability?

Expanding the problem

A fork, cont.

If there is final value in knowledge over and above the value of true belief only in cases when the environmental conditions are suitable for exercising abilities and the abilities are exercised, then exercising abilities, we are back once more on the other horn of the fork: There is no obvious value for knowledge over and above the value of true belief acquired through ability.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps

A genuine Ming vase is *prima facie* more valuable than a perfect replica of the Ming vase. Yet, there must first be an argument for why the existence of the final value of genuine Ming vases transfers to the existence of the final value of knowledge.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

Even if there exists final value in objects, does it follow that there is a final value for knowledge? Of course not. The Ming vase is an intuition pump designed to make the existence of final value more plausible; however, it's relatively easy to construct intuition pumps that push in the opposite direction.

What follows are four intuition pumps designed to push you towards thinking that either final value is misplaced instrumental value or a property of an individual's beliefs about the object, rather than a property of the object...

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

There are difficulties in pinning down our intuitions when dealing with perfect imitations, since they exist only in abstract thought-experiments: A genuine Picasso may be considered more valuable than an imitation, for example, but that may be because an imitation Picasso may be discovered to be an imitation—and upon its discovery its instrumental value may disappear in an instant.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

There are other cases in which perceived final value hides instrumental value: Gold, for example, was valued not due to any non-instrumental value of gold, but rather that any dilution of gold is detectable and gold is in a limited supply.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

Some individuals pay a great deal of money for designer clothing, glasses or cars. Each of these objects *prima facie* carry greater final value to some individuals over a near-perfect replica. But this apparent final value may in fact be instrumental: The subject is perceived by (or thinks they will be perceived by) others as desirable or valuable because they are able to afford the expensive genuine object over cheaper, near-perfect replicas; there is perceived value in the *subject* (wealth) rather than the object.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

There are also cases when the final value is likely due to the belief that an object of desire has a desirable essential property when there is none. George Clooney's washed cardigan may be more valuable to a rabid fan of George Clooney than an exact duplicate of George Clooney's washed cardigan, but George Clooney's cardigan does not grant anything of value over and above the exact duplicate. Instead, the value is in the subject, not the object. It is likely a *perceived* value of desirable properties being passed on from the previous owner.

The plausible nonexistence of final value

Some intuition pumps, cont.

It is difficult to (or, perhaps, impossible) to show that final value cannot exist.

I have no intentions of arguing for the nonexistence of final value.

However, even if we take cases like genuine Ming vases to indicate the *prima facie* existence of non-instrumental value in *some cases*, there are problems with the plausibility of a final value of knowledge.

The appearance of a final value of knowledge may in fact be a case of instrumental value in disguise, magical (or wishful) thinking, or a reflection of a subject's powerful desire to see the existence of final value when there is none.

Deflating further

The extended value problem

All the previously discussed problems and intuition pumps pose a problem for the plausibility of a final value of knowledge.

Furthermore, the instrumental value of knowledge is not over and above the instrumental value of a subset of true beliefs (e.g., the true belief is not too ephemeral).

I think the deflationist can go one step further. In fact, this step may be *required*. Here is the extended value problem: What final value does true belief have over and above the instrumental value of true representative mental states that are not beliefs ('almost-beliefs'), false belief and right action?

Examples

True representative states that are not beliefs: Preferences

It's trivial to construct toy cases with a finite number of available options and in these toy cases, a subject must make a choice among these available options. The subject will naturally prefer the (as far as they can determine) best available option; however, it doesn't follow that preferring option P over all other options entails that a subject believes that P...

Examples

True representative states that are not beliefs: Preferences, cont.

True Preference: A scientist chooses among the only four remaining competing scientific theories that are underdetermined by the available evidence (A, B, C, D). The scientist's credence for A is .17, B .17, C .17 and D .49. With no other choices available, the scientist prefers D over (A & B & C), but does not believe that D because the scientist believes that she ought to refrain from believing improbable beliefs and that it is more likely that $\neg D$.

True Belief: A scientist chooses among the only four remaining competing scientific theories that are underdetermined by the available evidence (A, B, C, D). The scientist's credence for A is .16, B .16, C .16 and D .52. The scientist prefers D over $\neg D$ (A & B & C). Furthermore, the scientist believes truly that D.

Examples

True representative states that are not beliefs: Delusions

Beliefs are but one set of representative states (i.e., one can wish that P, desire that P, want that P, and so on). Some mental states that are (possibly) not beliefs are *delusions* (Bayne 2010).

Delusions are shut off from traditional avenues of belief-revision. They are held far stronger by subjects than even knowledge. One example is as follows...

Examples

True representative states that are not beliefs: Delusions, cont.

Delusion: Magda is deluded into thinking that the Apocalypse will arrive within the year. Unbeknownst to anyone (including Magda), the Apocalypse does indeed arrive within the year.

True Belief: Magda believes truly that the Apocalypse will arrive within the year. Unbeknownst to anyone (including Magda), the Apocalypse does indeed arrive within the year.

Examples

False beliefs of greater instrumental value

It is possible to construct toy cases in which believing falsely is of *greater* instrumental value than the value of believing truly. In fact, it is trivial. The knowing subject need only lack a true belief that, if believed, would cause them to act differently. The subject that believes falsely, on the other hand, need only have their actions predicated on a false belief that is swamped by some good luck. One example is as follows...

Examples

False beliefs of greater instrumental value, cont.

False Belief: Randy believes falsely that his appointment is at 1:30 PM. He leaves his apartment thirty minutes earlier than he would had he believed that the appointment began at 2:00PM. Randy is caught in unexpected traffic and arrives at the appointment at 2:00PM. The appointment is in fact at 2:00PM.

True Belief: Randy believes truly that his appointment is at 2:00PM. He does not leave his apartment thirty minutes earlier than he would had he believed that the appointment began at 1:30PM. Randy is caught in unexpected traffic and arrives at the appointment at 2:30PM.

Examples

B-Zombies

If some representative mental states that are not beliefs are as instrumentally valuable as beliefs and some false beliefs are as instrumentally valuable as (if not more than) true beliefs, what of toy cases in which the subject lacks both representative mental states and a corresponding truth-value to a representative mental state?

There are, presumably, some species alive today (or in the history of planet Earth) that lack(ed) beliefs. But their success in evolutionary history isn't mitigated by the fact that they lack beliefs. In fact, if we grant each and every organism belief-states, there isn't any change in behaviour...

Examples

B-Zombies, cont.

I now introduce *B-Zombies*:

B-Zombies: A fox acts on a fixed disposition when in a certain environment to dig in a rabbit burrow. However, this is in B-Zombie World. In B-Zombie World, foxes, like all animals except for great apes, dolphins and ravens, have dispositions to behave in a certain way but lack all mental states that are accessible only to the subject. The fox is like a wind-up automaton (Descartes is quite happy to hear this). In fact, there is a rabbit in the burrow. The fox catches and eats the rabbit.

True Belief: A fox acts on a belief that there is a rabbit in a burrow to dig in a rabbit burrow. However, this isn't B-Zombie World; this is Fantasy World. In Fantasy World, foxes believe all sorts of things, as do all animals, including bugs and trees. In fact, there is a rabbit in the burrow. The fox catches and eats the rabbit.

Is the extended value problem a problem?

An expansion of geography

If the value of true belief is not over and above the value of false belief, true almost-belief or right action, then the extended value problem undermines both the value of both true belief and knowledge.

This is an interesting problem; however, this problem may be in due time resolved for the swamper or the non-swamper. Still, the map of the possible positions one may adopt when faced with the value problem has expanded a bit more.

Is the extended value problem a problem?

As a conclusion *ab absurdo* or a desired result?

The following conclusion may demonstrate the absurdity of taking value to be solely instrumental. If absurd, then there *must* exist a final value to knowledge.

I think the extended value problem is a problem that should be taken seriously. I do not think that objecting to the conclusion based on the conviction that knowledge clearly must have a final (but presently unarticulated) value over and above the value of true belief is a good reply, but it could very well be true.

There could be a final value to knowledge. This, I think, would be very interesting, and any theory that didn't succumb to these problems would be worth taking seriously as well.

Is the extended value problem a problem?

As a tu quoque?

There are deflationists that argue (persuasively, I think) that knowledge is true belief (Sartwell), or true belief and no relevant false beliefs (Foley). Foley and Sartwell (as well as most philosophers) follow the dictum *multum in parvo*—much in little—and desire a simple, parsimonious, concise theory of knowledge. The arguments for the lack of final value of true belief
Deflationary epistemologists need only take the next step and stop treating epistemology as solely interested in belief.

End

The gods did not reveal, from the beginning,/ All things to us, but in the course of time/ Through seeking we may learn and know things better./ But as for certain truth, no man has known it,/ Nor shall he know it, neither of the gods/ Nor yet of all the things of which I speak./ For even if by chance he were to utter/ The final truth, he would himself not know it: For all is but a woven web of guesses (Xenophanes, Fragments, DK, B 18; 35; & 34, as quoted in Popper, 2010, p. 51.)

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