

# The Value of True Belief

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*I ... find the most joyful delight in unraveling a nice, complicated knot. And it must also be because, at a time when as philosopher I doubt the world has an order, I am consoled to discover, if not an order, at least a series of connections in small areas of the world's affairs. (William of Baskerville, Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose, p. 394)*

It's *prima facie* the case that moral intentions that underlie actions, even if the action fails due to a deficiency in the agent or the environment conspiring against the agent, still matter *to us*. The right sort of intentions are valuable.

This can be expressed analogously in the idea that it is better to be *epistemically* virtuous than vicious even if the outcomes are indistinguishable in their results or if epistemically virtuous actions lead us to falsehood (e.g. William of Baskerville vs. conspiratorial thinking).

In short, there's something valuable about our behaviour, dispositions and intentions, and we treat acting with good intentions as a mitigation for assigning moral blame. The same may be true of assigning epistemic blame when believing falsely (e.g. the archer and a strong gust of wind).

Rather than the relationship between belief and world being of value, it is the *way* the relationship is formed that is of value, even if that belief is false in any one instance. But why do we put value into these behaviours? It is a difficult knot to untangle.

It is *prima facie* preferable to instantiate intellectual virtues and fall short of knowledge than to instantiate intellectual vices and accidentally hit upon the truth. But why are these intellectual virtues valuable? One explanation is that they are valuable in themselves, even when they fall short of the truth. Another is that they are valuable because there is some important relation to *truth*, and we dub this relationship 'knowledge'.

Why do we value knowledge?

Here's one explanation for why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief: you get more true beliefs and you won't give up those true beliefs easily; you won't get more false beliefs and you'll give up those false beliefs easily. The value of intellectual virtues is in virtue of some other value, namely they're truth conducive.

Of course, there are problems with this approach, but in general, knowledge—and the intellectual virtues that help produce knowledge—are valuable by virtue of being *aimed at* something else of value: truth. The aim could be a matter of fact (it's in fact reliably truth conducive) or a matter of intention (we're intending or desiring truth) (e.g. Zagzebski, Montmarquet).

But why is truth more valuable than falsity?

Here's one explanation: we care about our beliefs having a certain relationship to reality. However, that doesn't explain why truth *itself* is valuable. Why think some relationships between beliefs and reality are more valuable than others?

Either this relationship between belief and reality is valuable in-itself or it's valuable in virtue of something else of value.

Let's consider the first option: there are demonstrably unimportant true beliefs (e.g. whether the number of stars in the universe are even or odd) that don't seem valuable in-themselves. These are truths like lucky horseshoes: they may merely reflect our own psychology; it isn't about truth, but about us.

It may be preferable, all things being equal, to believe truly than falsely for any belief, but it's not the sort of truths that we consider to be valuable. But still truth is valuable.

Here's a further explanation that takes the second option: *ceteris paribus*, acting on true beliefs accomplishes your goals; *ceteris paribus*, acting on false beliefs doesn't accomplish your goals.

This explanation does not look like it needs any further explaining. It is a *prima facie* terminus to the regress of explanations: knowledge is more valuable than non-knowledge because *ceteris paribus* acting on knowledge is more conducive towards accomplishing goals than acting on non-knowledge. This explains why many people may not think unimportant truths are valuable. Knowledge breeds success and success is valuable.



To recap: if intellectual virtues aren't valuable in-themselves, they are valuable because they have some relation to truth. But we care only of particular types of truth-production, namely knowledge.

If knowledge isn't valuable in-itself, knowledge is *prima facie* valuable in virtue of some other value, namely epistemic agents that know, all else being equal, are more capable of getting more truths. But why value some truths and not others?

All things being equal, acting on truths help solve problems we care about (truth vs. falsehood). Epistemic agents that know are capable of solving *more* problems in novel situations (reliable vs. accidental belief). The solutions to these problems are also less likely to be revised when encountering defeaters (knowledge vs. justified true belief). And so on.

But why care about true beliefs fixed in this *particular* way? Why not others? We can be successful in ways that fall short of knowledge.

We can think of knowledge as falling at the far end of a spectrum. Consider the usual edge cases in epistemology: there are many cases that are dangerously close to knowledge under different accounts, but come up short due a number of potential reasons, such as epistemic bad luck, epistemic double luck, epistemic luck, violations of safety or sensitivity, unreliability, the belief isn't fixed in the right ways, and so on.

Imagine that Adam and Bertrand have the same capabilities. They are in environments conducive to Adam and Bertrand accomplishing their goals. For any fact  $p$  Adam knows that  $P$ .

For any belief  $P$  Bertrand's beliefs are as fixed as Adam's knowledge that  $P$ .

For any fact  $P$  Bertrand does not know that  $P$ . For any first-order belief  $P$ , Bertrand believes truly. But for any second-order belief *about* his beliefs, he believes falsely that he knows that  $P$ .

If we care only for the instrumental value of knowledge, we should be indifferent in our choice between Adam and Bertrand. They believe the same about first-order beliefs, and for any action predicated on their beliefs they both accomplish their goals.

Furthermore, aren't Bertrand's second-order false beliefs of great instrumental value to Bertrand? They make his first-order true beliefs as fixed as Adam's. They help Bertrand solve any problem at hand equally well as Adam's.

So that explanation for the value of knowledge isn't satisfactory. It isn't solely a matter of success that differentiates the value of knowledge from the value of these knowledge-pretenders that are close to—but fall short of—knowledge.

Let's try another explanation for why we think knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief: when ignorant of our epistemic standing—when behind an epistemic 'veil of ignorance'—for any belief P it is *obviously* preferable to know rather than believe falsely.

Bertrand's false second-order beliefs may be instrumentally valuable (they fix his true first-order beliefs in a way that they aren't easily subject to false defeaters, for example), but when in a state of ignorance over whether our first-order beliefs are true or false, true second-order beliefs are more valuable than false second-order beliefs.

But why is it preferable to have a true belief that Bertrand knows that P? That epistemic 'veil of ignorance' may work when ranking preferences (we prefer to be Adam and not Bertrand), but the belief that knowledge is valuable in virtue of the value of breeding success is parochial rather than general. It seems I should be indifferent to being either Adam and Bertrand if what I value is the instrumental value of belief.

But that is absurd. I desire both to know and to accomplish my goals. I don't want to know *just because* it facilitates accomplishing my goals, because then if in possible worlds believing falsely bred success in these possible worlds I would value believing falsely. There's something more valuable to knowledge.

In other words, what makes truth valuable isn't *solely* in virtue of the value of it breeding success. It has to be something about the proper sort of relationship between belief and the world.



Perhaps, like intentions that underlie actions, even if the action fails due to a deficiency in the agent or the environment conspiring against the agent, intentions still matter *to us*. Right intentions are valuable (moral intentions can mitigate blame, for example).

This can be expressed analogously in the idea that it is better to be virtuous than vicious in our intentions even if the outcomes of virtuous actions are indistinguishable in their results from vicious actions. It's not *just* because intentions guiding actions in the right environments leads to desirable results more frequently or with greater stability.

But think back to where we started with the value of intellectual virtues. While the relationship between belief and world is valuable in-itself (and not just for instrumental reasons), there is also the *way* the relationship is formed that is of value (we value William of Baskerville because he is intellectually virtuous).

We now have a plethora of values, not all valuable in virtue of being aimed at the truth: the way in which we act (irrespective of being truth conducive), our intentions (we aim at truth), the relationship between belief and the world (truth over falsity) and the satisfaction of goals (pertinent truths over unimportant truths).