

Epistemic Oughts and Mights

Philipp Keller
University of Geneva
philipp.keller@unige.ch

The value of knowledge

Are there epistemic values? The question is ambiguous between (i) are there values in the field of epistemology? and (ii) are there values that are also epistemic? The question has real interest only if taken in the second sense. We are not interested in schwepistemic values, for example, where schwepistemology is defined by its aim of maximising the ratio of bullshit among your beliefs. Someone might say that you schwepistemically ought to believe any bullshit whatsoever, but as this does not entail that you ought to believe any bullshit whatsoever, this schwepistemic ‘obligation’ is of little interest to us. The question then is whether key topics of epistemology, like truth or knowledge, have value.

“The value of knowledge” (or “the value of truth”) presents a second ambiguity: in one sense, “value of” is appositive, as in “the value of justice”; in the other, it is a functor mapping knowledge to something else, i.e. its value. Those who think that the value of knowledge can be characterised in non-epistemic terms understand it in the second way. But we should understand it in this way even if we think, as we should, that the value of knowledge is irreducibly epistemic. Knowledge has value, but is not itself a value – it is an epistemic state, not an ideal aim of epistemic states.¹

What is the value of knowledge, understood along these terms? I will give my answer in three steps:

- (i) why is it good to have beliefs at all, i.e. to have the attitude of wanting-to-know?
- (ii) why is it good to avoid mistakes?
- (iii) why is it good to be able to provide reasons?

For reasons I hope will become clearer below, I think we should strictly separate these three levels. With respect to them, the question in what the value of knowledge consists receives three different answers:

- (i’) it’s good to want-to-know because this is noble and sets us above the lower animals;
- (ii’) it’s good to avoid mistakes, because once we have engaged in (i), we should not do it so badly that it would have been better not to engage in the activity at all;
- (iii’) it’s good to be able to provide reasons because this makes one virtuous.

(i) commits me to fallibilism, (ii) to a certain view about the normativity of logic and (iii) to a certain stand with respect to the paradox of epistemic permissivity. Let us address the three questions in turn.

level i: why have beliefs at all?

Why is it good to engage in the pursuit of truth? Why shouldn’t we not be disinterested in the truth, abstain from forming any beliefs and from making any judgements at all? We certainly could do so, but it would be a bad thing to do. There are instrumental reasons for this: even if a life without belief may realise a certain number of goods, the pursuit of practical goals is certainly facilitated by beliefs. There are, however, also epistemic reasons, which constitute part of the value of knowledge.

It is good to engage in the pursuit of truth because our ability to do so is part of what sets us above the brutes. Even if other animals may be capable of beliefs, the pursuit of truth as such seems unique to humans. It is also their best claim to intrinsic value – we are the rational animals after all. What does it mean to engage in the pursuit of truth? Following Kevin Mulligan (forthcoming), I think that it is to have a *sui generis* attitude of wanting-to-know. This attitude is *sui generis*, because it is not the

¹Truth, on the other hand, not only has value, but is itself a value. We will come back to this below.

attitude of wanting or desiring to be in some state of knowing, but rather a direct, uncomposable and primitive relation to some truthbearer.

Couldn't we have beliefs without engaging in the pursuit of truth? Why should it be impossible to have beliefs in the absence of an attitude of wanting-to-know? And even if it is, of what kind is the relevant impossibility? It would be clearly insufficient to point out that a Moore-paradoxical attitude to one's own beliefs ("I believe that p , but I do not think that p is true") is irrational, for this does not yet answer the question why it is good to be rational in that sense. The connection between believing and wanting-to-know must be tighter. Wanting-to-know is constitutive of our having beliefs, which are attempts at knowledge. Knowledge is in that sense explanatorily more basic than belief (Williamson 2000; Hossack 2007).

While you cannot, I would hold, have beliefs without engaging in the pursuit of truth, i.e. without displaying the attitude of wanting-to-know, it is certainly possible to have the attitude but still live a life without beliefs. That was precisely what the ancient sceptics advocated (Burnyeat 1983: 126): they advocated *ataraxia*, a "matter of not worrying about truth and falsity any more" Burnyeat (1983: 121). But because *ataraxia* was supposed to be grounded in a prior recognition of the equal strength (*isostheneia*) of opposed assertions, it grows out of a prior attitude of wanting-to-know. Those who lack the attitude are fools, not sceptics. Wanting-to-know is in this sense prior to belief – it is presupposed by, but does not presuppose it.

The aim of belief, therefore, is not truth, but knowledge. The most basic epistemic value is the value of knowledge, not of truth.

Why is it good to have beliefs? Perhaps surprisingly: because they may be false. That they may be false means that there is no guarantee that our attempts at knowledge succeed. This is the important truth in fallibilism: there is no easy knowledge. Contra Lewis (1996: 419), fallible knowledge is not knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error. Contra Cohen (1988: 91), ? : 128 and Brueckner (2005: 384), neither is fallible knowledge knowledge of a truth that is not entailed by the evidence. The reason for this is simple: if either of these accounts were true, there would be no fallible knowledge. If I know that p , then surely p is true in all possibilities uneliminated by my knowledge (cf. Hawthorne 2004: 25). If my evidence does not entail what I claim to know, then I cannot taking (what I take to be) my knowledge to be evidence. Even fallible knowledge is evidence, however (cf. Williamson 2000).²

level 2: avoiding mistakes

An analogy to house-building may be helpful here: suppose, for the sake of the argument, that it is good to build houses at all. While there is nothing reproachable about living in caves, the cave-men miss something important. This positive evaluation of house-building is implicitly conditional: it is good to build *proper* houses, i.e. houses that to some degree fulfil their essential function of protecting their inhabitants from the elements. The construction of houses that not only fail to fulfil this role, but positively endanger their inhabitants (in the sense that they are less safe within than outside the house), is not just bad, but forbidden.

level 3: epistemic mights, not epistemic oughts

It has to be noted that on no level of the analysis we've ever used an epistemic 'ought'. To be sure, where evidence is conclusive if available at all, as it is in logic, we have a negative obligation to avoid mistakes: we should not assert that q if we previously asserted that p and that $p \rightarrow q$ and want to stand by these assertions. Even this negative obligation is conditional, however: it applies only to epistemic subject who decided to engage in the pursuit of truth at all.

²Could we at least define fallibilism about justification as the negation of "if S has justification for believing that p in virtue of having evidence e , then e entail p " (Brueckner 2005: 384–385)? I do not think so. Fallibilism about knowledge and about justification is motivated by epistemic humility, i.e. the recognition that our epistemic powers are finite and to err is human. Gettier-cases and the problem of induction are not needed for this.