RELIABILIST RESPONSES TO THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM

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Summary
After sketching my own solution to the Value of Knowledge Problem, which argues for a deontological understanding of justification and understands the value of knowing interesting propositions by the value we place on believing as we ought to believe, I discuss Alvin Goldman’s and Erik Olsson’s recent attempts to explain the value of knowledge within the framework of their reliabilist epistemology.

We ought to know many things. For example, we ought to know who we are and what we are doing, where we come from and where we are going to. We ought to know our address, the names of our children, and what the colour of ripe strawberries is. In all these cases, we talk about what we ought to know and not what we ought to have true beliefs about. If we become interested in something that happened and in who was involved, then we want to know the answers to these questions. Again, our aim is knowledge and not mere true belief, i.e. true belief that falls short of knowledge. Why are our epistemic obligations and ambitions focused on knowledge, when there are less demanding epistemic states, like true belief, that would, it seems, serve as equally well?

I will pursue this question, which Plato was the first to raise in the *Meno*, along traditional lines. Assuming that justification marks the difference between knowledge and mere true belief—justification which, ideally, would also satisfy an anti-Gettier condition—we can ask why we should care about our beliefs being justified. I suppose a plausible answer to this second question will run along the lines that justified beliefs are (and are known to be) more likely to be true than unjustified beliefs. Assuming that we aim at true beliefs and that, in some sense, it would be good to believe truly, this idea, in turn, leads to a more general question. Why should we care about what is likely to be good?
In the first section of this paper, I argue that such a concern cannot be vindicated by appeal to the goodness of what is likely to be good. After all, what is likely to be good might not be good at all. We have to understand this concern as a concern for satisfying a basic deontological requirement. Preferring the likely over the unlikely good is simply how our preferences ought to be; even if by having such a preference we prefer what, as it turns out, is worse to what is better. Preferring how we ought to prefer is—like believing how we ought to believe—something we value. I will sketch how such a deontological understanding of justification solves the Value of Knowledge Problem. In a nutshell, we value being as we ought to be, because we value being active in the pursuit of the good. When our beliefs are justified we believe as we ought to believe and, thus, we value knowledge over mere true belief.

Against this background of my own solution to the Value of Knowledge Problem, I then turn to investigate in sections 2 and 3 Olsson’s and Goldman’s recent attempts to solve the Value of Knowledge Problem. The basis of my solution is a deontological understanding of justification, whatever the right theory of justification will be. Goldman and Olsson are reliabilists. Given their respective methods of acquisition, justified beliefs are more likely to be true than unjustified beliefs. Olsson’s idea is that having reliable beliefs makes it more likely to have reliable beliefs in the future. How this idea could provide any explanation of the value of reliable beliefs, however, remains unclear. I have stronger sympathies for Goldman’s solution. My disagreement with him is limited to the consequentialist framework in which he operates—a framework which is independent of his reliabilism and against which I argue in the first section.

1. The normativity of what is likely to be good

Suppose you have a choice between two things A and B. If you choose A, this will quite likely, but not with certainty, lead to some good. If you choose B, this might lead to the same good, but it will do so only if choosing A will not. Because it is quite likely that choosing A will lead to the good, the likelihood of B leading to the good is quite small. You care about the good. Apart from their likelihood of leading to the good, you do not care about either A or B. You can think of the good as a large sum of money, which is the single prize of a lottery. The two things A and B