THE EVOLUTIONARY AND SOCIAL PREFERENCE FOR KNOWLEDGE: HOW TO SOLVE MENO’S PROBLEM WITHIN RELIABILISM*

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Summary
This paper addresses various solutions to Meno’s Problem: Why is it that knowledge is more valuable than merely true belief? Given both a pragmatist as well as a veritist understanding of epistemic value, it is argued that a reliabilist analysis of knowledge, in general, promises a hopeful strategy to explain the extra value of knowledge. It is, however, shown that two recent attempts to solve Meno’s Problem within reliabilism are severely flawed: Olsson’s conditional probability solution and Goldman’s value autonomization solution. The paper proceeds with a discussion of the purpose of having a higher value of knowledge as opposed to merely true belief, both in evolutionary and social terms. It claims that under a reliabilist analysis of knowledge it can be explained how knowers could evolve rather than just truthful believers. Subsequently, the paper develops an account of how we can manipulate our testimonial environment in an epistemically beneficial way by valuing reliably produced true belief more that just true belief and so gives an indirect justification of the extra value of knowledge.

Even though every instance of knowledge is an instance of true belief, knowledge—at least in most contexts—is regarded as more valuable than a merely true belief with the same content. When a person believes something true on the basis of, say, a lucky guess, reading tea leaves, or wishful thinking, that is, without knowing it, most of us would say that she is in a less valuable state than if she had knowledge. The doctrine of the extra value of knowledge (see Goldman & Olsson 2009, henceforth “G&O”)

* The main argument of the paper is based on a semi-published master thesis (Werning, 1997) I wrote more than 10 years ago. Special thanks go to Dirk Koppelberg who first raised my interest in reliabilism. I am very grateful to Alvin Goldman, Erik J. Olsson, Ludwig Fahrbach, Gerhard Schurz, and Leopold Stubenberg for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.
is as old as epistemology itself and was first introduced by Plato. For him the doctrine gave rise to a problem that he proposes in his dialogue Meno and which is now known to epistemologists as Meno’s Problem (Kvanvig 1998, Koppelberg 2005). Plato puts forward the problem as one of rational choice. Assume our rational agent have the desire to go to Larissa. He has to choose between a guide who knows how to get there and a guide who truthfully believes how to get there, but does not know. Since the probability of the agent’s desire to be fulfilled, everything else being equal, depends solely on the truth values of the guides’ beliefs, it is as rational to choose the second guide as it is to choose the first one. For, the fact that the first guide in addition to having a true belief also knows the way does not increase the probability of success. Plato uses the Greek adjective ophelimos ‘profitable, useful’ to express that true/correct belief (orthe doxa) is not less useful than knowledge (episteme) (Platon 1968, Meno 97c). The conclusion of his critical reasoning can thus be summarized as the claim: True belief has just the same utility as knowledge. The question for us is: Why is it still rational to value knowledge higher than merely true belief?

I would like to stress that Meno’s Problem in its original version is phrased in terms of practical rationality and attaches mere instrumental value to truth. The truth of a belief is valuable—so Plato apparently implies—solely because it increases the probability of one’s desires to be fulfilled. Meno’s Problem in its original pragmatic version thus consists of the following three propositions, which apparently form an inconsistent set:

MP1. *Extra value of knowledge.* A person’s knowledge is more valuable than a person’s merely true belief with the same content.

MP2. *Rational belief evaluation.* A person’s belief is the more valuable, the more probable it makes successful action.

MP3. *No pragmatic difference.* A person’s knowledge makes successful action more probable only insofar as the person’s merely true belief with the same content would make successful action more probable.

In the paper I will argue that a version of reliabilism provides a solution to the problem and, as far as I can see, the only viable solution. I do however think that it does so for other reasons than G&O have proposed in their article. I will begin with some clarifications regarding Meno’s Problem and continue with a discussion of its relation to the so-called Swamping Problem and the value of truth. I will then discuss two ideas by G&O: