

KNOWING THE ANSWER, UNDERSTANDING AND EPISTEMIC VALUE

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ABSTRACT. This paper principally argues for two controversial theses: that understanding, unlike knowledge, is distinctively valuable, and that understanding is the proper goal of inquiry.

1. One of the most central topics in contemporary epistemology concerns the issue of epistemic value; in particular, the value of knowledge. Knowledge has been the focus of much of our epistemological theorising, and this prompts the question of why. What is it about knowledge that prompts us to regard it as distinctively valuable in this way such that it is worthy of this scrutiny? It is, I would suggest, incumbent on any epistemological theory that it can answer this question, even if the answer that is offered adverts to some error on our part. That is, while one *validatory* answer to the question might proceed by offering an explanation of why knowledge is distinctively valuable, an alternative, *revisionary*, answer to the question might proceed by explaining why knowledge isn't distinctively valuable while conjoining this explanation with a further story about why we might have naturally thought it to be distinctively valuable. In what follows, we will begin by exploring the prospects for a validatory response to the question. We will refer to the task of answering this question, whether in a validatory or revisionary manner, as the *value problem*.

2. Before we can turn to this issue, however, we need to get a better grip on what it means to say that knowledge is distinctively valuable. It certainly means more, for example, than

simply showing that knowledge is generally more valuable than mere true belief, what I have elsewhere called the *primary value problem*.¹ After all, suppose that one argued that knowledge, unlike mere true belief, entailed that one possessed justification in support of one's belief, and that this property of belief was valuable. One would thus have an explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, but clearly no explanation at all of why knowledge is distinctively valuable, at least given the further thesis that there is more to knowledge than mere justified true belief. After all, if this is all there is to be said about the value of knowledge, then it prompts the question of why it is knowledge, specifically, that we focus upon in our epistemological theorising, rather than just justified true belief.²

One might thus think that what is required is an explanation of why knowledge is more valuable than that which falls short of knowledge, what I have elsewhere termed the *secondary value problem*. Even a response of this sort will not obviously suffice to solve the value problem, however. In order to see this, suppose that one argued that knowledge is more valuable, as a matter of degree, than that which falls short of knowledge. One would thus have a response to the secondary value problem. Notice, however, that this account of the value of knowledge invites a 'continuum' picture of epistemic value, with knowledge simply marking one point further up the continuum than that which falls short of knowledge. But this picture of epistemic value doesn't present us with any explanation of why it is *this* point on the continuum that is the focus of our epistemological theorising, rather than, say, a point just before or just after the one that knowledge marks. In short, this picture doesn't explain why knowledge is distinctively valuable.

Elsewhere I have thus argued that what is required of a satisfactory response to the value problem is a response that satisfies what I call the *tertiary value problem*, which is the problem of showing that knowledge is more valuable than that which falls short of knowledge not just as a matter of degree but as a matter of kind. The idea is that as one moves up the continuum of epistemic value something special happens when one reaches the point that knowledge marks such that more than just a difference in the degree of value enters the picture.³

3. I suspect that many would want to resist the rather austere demand laid down by the

tertiary value problem, but this is not the place to explore this issue further.⁴ What ought to be uncontentious is that it is at least *desirable* to answer the value problem in such a way that one can meet the tertiary value problem. Indeed, in what follows we will simply assume that an adequate response to the secondary value problem is available—i.e., that we have an explanation of why knowledge is of more value, as a matter of degree, than that which falls short of knowledge—and focus our attentions exclusively on the tertiary value problem. As we will see, this issue has important ramifications for the ultimate topic of this paper, which is the relationship between knowing-why and understanding.

4. There is every reason for thinking that there is no account of the value of knowledge available which can satisfy the tertiary value problem. The most promising account in the literature is that offered by certain virtue epistemologists which claims that knowledge, properly understood along virtue-theoretic lines, falls under a general class of entity which has non-instrumental—i.e., *final*—value.⁵ This more general entity is that of *achievement*.

Consider an archer—let's call him Archie—taking aim at a target and hitting that target with his arrow. Suppose now that Archie in fact has no archery-relevant skills and simply hit the target by luck. Would this success on Archie's part count as an achievement? Surely not, since achievements are clearly the product of skill. Interestingly, however, it does not suffice for achievement that one is both relevantly skilful and successful. For consider the following Gettier-style case. Arche has all the relevant skills and fires at the target. Moreover, he hits the target. Still, the success doesn't count as a *bona fide* achievement, and the reason for this is that during the flight of the arrow a freak gust of wind blew the arrow off-course, and then a second freak gust of wind fortuitously blew the arrow back on course again. The moral of cases like this seems to be that achievements result when an agent is successful *because of* their ability.

It does seem to be true that achievements are distinctively valuable. Imagine two agents, one of whom hits the target because of ability, and the other who hits the target through luck, either because he lacks the relevant skills, or else because while he has the relevant skills and yet the relationship between his success and his ability is 'gettierized' by luck intervening in the flight of the arrow to the target. From a practical point of view, it may make no difference at all how the success was achieved. Even so, wouldn't one prefer to be

in the situation of the archer who succeeds through ability rather than through luck? More generally, wouldn't we value success that is through ability—i.e., a *bona fide* achievement—differently to a success that is not through ability? To sharpen our intuitions here we can simply stipulate that the instrumental value of the success in this case is kept fixed, regardless of whether the success constitutes an achievement or not. Accordingly, if we grant that there is a difference in value present, then it will not be a difference in instrumental value, but rather a difference in final value. And that seems just right. For whatever additional instrumental value an achievement contributes over a corresponding success that falls short of an achievement, the fact remains that the fundamental difference in value between the two relates to the fact that it is only achievements, and not successes that fall short of achievements, which are of final value; that are valuable for their own sake.

5. The import of this to the debate regarding the value problem, and the tertiary value problem in particular, should be obvious. On the standard virtue-theoretic account of knowledge at least, knowledge is to be understood as cognitive success (i.e., true belief) that is attained through cognitive ability (i.e., epistemic virtue, broadly conceived). Moreover, given Gettier-style cases in epistemology, the right kind of relationship between cognitive success and cognitive ability seems to be of the same sort that one finds in achievements more generally—i.e., one's cognitive success must be *because of* one's cognitive ability. If this account of the structure of knowledge is right, however, then knowledge is just the cognitive aspect of the more general phenomenon of achievement—i.e., knowledge just is cognitive achievement.

If this thesis were correct, then it would offer an elegant response to the tertiary value problem. Why is knowledge distinctively valuable? Because knowledge, unlike that which falls short of knowledge, is a cognitive achievement and so deserving of final value. Thus, the difference in value between knowledge and that which falls short of knowledge is not merely a matter of degree but of kind, just as demanded by the tertiary value problem.

6. Unfortunately, this account of the value of knowledge does not work. The problem does not lie with the idea that achievements are finally valuable, though there are issues to be dealt

with on this score.⁶ Rather, the fundamental difficulty with this proposal is with the identification of knowledge with cognitive achievement. The reason for this is that there are clear-cut cases of knowledge which aren't cases of cognitive achievement, and clear-cut cases of cognitive achievement which aren't cases of knowledge. We will take these cases in turn.

Consider again the case of Archie. Suppose that Archie has all the relevant archery abilities and that he brings to bear these abilities in effecting the hitting of the target. More specifically, Gettier-style luck does not intervene between his ability and his success to undermine his achievement. On the account offered above, then, this is an achievement on Archie's part, a success that is because of ability. Suppose now, however, that Archie chose his target at random from the range of targets before him, but that, unbeknownst to him, if he had chosen any of the other targets on this range then he would have missed because of a forcefield hidden in the target that would have deflected the arrow. That is, there is luck in play in Archie's success, in the general sense that this is a success that could very easily have been a failure. Note, however, that the luck in play is not of the 'intervening' sort that is operative in Gettier-style cases, but is instead specifically related to the environment in which the success is achieved. What is interesting about 'environmental' luck of this sort is that it is entirely compatible with *bona fide* achievements. Archie's achievement in hitting the target because of his ability is in no way diminished because of the presence of this environmental luck. This result is significant, since knowledge *is* incompatible with environmental luck.

In order to see this, consider the famous 'barn façade' case, an example that, structurally, is the epistemic analogue of the archery case just given. Our agent—let's call him 'Barney'—sees a barn in ideal cognitive conditions and on this basis forms the true belief that there is a barn in front of him. Moreover, nothing intervenes between Barney's barn-detecting abilities and his cognitive success—there is, for example, no barn façade before him which is obscuring from view a genuine barn—and so we should say that Barney is exhibiting a cognitive achievement in this case—i.e., a cognitive success that is because of cognitive ability.

But all we need now do to create a problem for the 'knowledge as achievement' thesis is stipulate that Barney is in fact in barn façade county, in which nearly all the barn-shaped objects are fakes which are undetectable to the naked eye—and thus that had he looked at any

other barn-shaped object in the area then he would have formed a false belief. The presence of this environmental luck does not undermine Barney's cognitive achievement any more than it does in the case of Archie that we just looked at. Nevertheless, luck of this sort, such that Barney has an unsafe belief—i.e., a belief that could have easily been wrong—is incompatible with knowledge.⁷ There is thus sometimes more to knowledge than a mere cognitive achievement.⁸

Consider now a second case. Imagine our agent—let's call her Jennifer—steps off the train in an unfamiliar town and asks the first person she meets for directions.⁹ Suppose that this informant has first-hand knowledge of the area and straightforwardly communicates this to Jennifer. Wouldn't we say that Jennifer could gain knowledge of the right way to go in this way? I think we would. Moreover, if testimonial knowledge cannot be gained in this manner then it seems that we know an awful lot less than we might antecedently think we know.

What is significant about such cases for our purposes, however, is that we wouldn't treat Jennifer's cognitive success as being because of *her* cognitive abilities. If anything, we would treat it as being because of her *informant's* cognitive abilities (or at least because of the combined cognitive abilities of Jennifer-and-her-informant), but certainly not just her cognitive abilities. Thus, her cognitive success does not constitute a cognitive achievement on her part, even though it is an instance of knowledge. Sometimes, then, there is a lot less to knowledge than a cognitive achievement as well.¹⁰

7. So given that this is the only plausible account available of the distinctive value of knowledge—i.e., an account which can meet the tertiary value problem—then the failure of this account means that there is no *validatory* response to the value problem available. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no adequate *revisionary* response available. This is the line that I take. Since paradigm cases of knowledge are almost exclusively cases of cognitive achievements, it is no surprise that we might think that knowledge is distinctively valuable even though it isn't.

I also have a further claim up my sleeve in this respect. Like Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), I hold that understanding is distinctively valuable. Unlike Kvanvig, however, I have an explanation of why this is the case. In order to sharpen our discussion, let us focus on understanding of a specific proposition (rather than, say, a subject area), such as—to borrow

an example from Brit Brogaard (2007)—understanding of why one’s house burned down. According to Kvanvig, understanding, unlike knowledge, is entirely compatible with epistemic luck, in the sense that there is no difficulty in supposing that an agent might have understanding of this fact and yet his belief be unsafe. This claim is, however, false, and recognising this has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between knowledge-why and understanding.

8. A natural explanation of why knowledge is distinctively valuable adverts to the role that knowledge plays in inquiry. After all, one could plausibly construe all knowledge as the answer to a question, at least if one construes what constitutes the target question in a broad fashion.¹¹ At best, such an account of the value of knowledge only seems to be able to supply us with an answer to the secondary value problem, since there appears no inherent reason why simply in virtue of being the successful product of inquiry knowledge should have specifically *final* value. As we will now see, however, the matter is more complex than it first appears.

When we talk about the product of inquiry as being knowledge of the answer to a question I take it that what we are interested in—at least typically at any rate—is knowledge of *why* such-and-such is the case. For example, suppose I undertake an inquiry to find out why my house burned down. In such a case we might regard the question in play as being ‘Why did my house burn down?’ and the knowledge that is the result of such a (successful) inquiry as being knowledge of the answer to this question—*viz.*, knowledge of why my house burned down. The standard way of accounting for knows-why is in terms of propositional knowledge. So I know *why* my house burned down because I know *that* it burned down because of (say) faulty wiring.¹²

One might think that understanding—at least of the sort that is our focus here—is nothing more than just knowing why. That is, to understand why my house burned down is just to know why my house burned down, and to know why my house burned down is just to know that it burned down because of (say) faulty wiring.¹³ If that’s right, and many think so, then understanding collapses into propositional knowledge anyway, and thus insofar as knowledge is not distinctively valuable, then (pending some further argument at least) understanding is not distinctively valuable either. Importantly, however, as I will now argue,

understanding does not reduce to propositional knowledge, and thus the way is open to argue that there is a fundamental epistemic standing that is distinctively valuable. Moreover, insofar as we can construe the product of inquiry as specifically providing us with understanding, rather than simply propositional knowledge (or something reducible to propositional knowledge, like knowledge-why), then the possibility emerges that inquiry is the route to a distinctively valuable epistemic standing.¹⁴

9. There is a very simple reason why there is more to understanding than mere knowing-why. In order to see this, we first need to think a little more about what is involved in understanding.

To begin with, notice that understanding, like knowledge, is factive. This point might not seem initially obvious, and the reason for this is that there are species of understanding which are not factive, at least in any straightforward sense. I might be said to understand quantum physics, for example, and yet this seems entirely consistent with the possibility that I have some false beliefs in this regard (though note that you'd better not have many false beliefs, and the false beliefs you have had better not be of facts which are central to the subject matter in hand). Remember, however, that the type of understanding that we are concerned with is more localised, and concerns a specific proposition. Of this sort of understanding there can be no doubt that understanding is factive. In order to illustrate this, suppose that I believe that my house has burned down because of an act of vandalism, when it was in fact caused by faulty wiring. Do I understand why my house burned down? Clearly not.¹⁵

So far, then, understanding and knowledge have similar properties. Another property they share is an incompatibility with Gettier-style epistemic luck. Imagine, for example, that I arrive home to see my house burned to the ground and a bunch of people outside my house dressed up as fire officers. Suppose I ask one of them what happened, and I am told that the reason why my house burned down was that I had faulty wiring. Suppose further, however, that the person that I am speaking to is not in fact a fire officer at all. Indeed, of all the people outside my house, none of them is a fire officer, the fire brigade having long since left the scene. Instead, they are simply a group on their way to a fancy dress party and are merely taking the opportunity to pretend to be genuine fire officers. Luckily, however, the entirely

invented answer that my informant gives me is true. Can I know *why* my house burnt down on this basis? Clearly not, since, for one thing, I manifestly don't know that my house burned down because of faulty wiring, given the Gettierization involved in my gaining a true belief. But do I understand, nonetheless, why my house has burned down? Again, surely not. How can one gain an understanding of why one's house burned down by (unbeknownst to one) speaking to someone who knows nothing about what caused the fire?

I noted earlier that Kvanvig holds that understanding is compatible with epistemic luck, but one might now wonder why this is the case, given that it is so clear that it *isn't* compatible with Gettier-style epistemic luck. The reason for this is that the relationship between understanding and epistemic luck is not straightforward since, while understanding isn't compatible Gettier-style epistemic luck, it *is* compatible with the sort of environmental luck that we discussed earlier. For consider now the following scenario. Suppose I arrive home as before to find my house burned down, but that this time the person I get the information from regarding the reason why this happened is genuinely a fire officer who knows what she is talking about. Suppose, however, that when I arrived back at my house there was a group of people outside who all seemed to be fire officers, and that I chose one of these people at random to speak to about the cause of the fire. Imagine, though, that nearly all of the people outside my house are merely dressed as fire officers on their way to the fancy dress party noted earlier, and that I just happened to choose the one genuine fire officer among them. Furthermore, had I spoken to one of the fake fire officers then I would have been told a false explanation of why my house had burned down, but be none the wiser.

The structure of this case should be familiar to us, since it is structurally analogous to the barn façade example in that one has a true belief that is lucky in the sense that it is unsafe but where the epistemic luck involved is not of the intervening, Gettier-style variety. What is interesting about this case, however, is that although one's knowledge of why one's house burned down—more specifically, one's knowledge that one's house burned down because of faulty wiring—is undermined by the presence of this luck, one's understanding of why one's house burned down is not undermined. That is, one can gain a genuine understanding of why one's house burned down via the testimony of a genuine fire officer, even if there is environmental luck in play. Understanding, then, is compatible with one type of epistemic luck—*viz.*, environmental epistemic luck—while being incompatible with another type of epistemic luck—*viz.*, intervening, Gettier-style luck.¹⁶

10. So understanding, then, unlike knowledge, is compatible with environmental epistemic luck. There is a good reason for this, in that understanding, again unlike knowledge, is in its nature a cognitive achievement. The necessary marks of a cognitive achievement are all there. One can gain understanding and yet, like cognitive achievements more generally, not have knowledge of the target proposition because of the presence of environmental luck. Furthermore, just as one can gain knowledge without exhibiting a cognitive achievement—as in the testimonial case described above—so one can have knowledge of the target proposition and yet lack understanding.

In order to see this, just consider the following case. Suppose I gain an understanding of why my house has burned down by speaking to a genuine fire officer. Suppose further, that I now tell my young son why our house burned down. My son, unlike me, has no idea at all how faulty wiring might cause a fire. Nevertheless, he can surely come to know why his house burned down by being told the reason from someone who he knows is a reliable informant, such as his father. Manifestly, however, he does not understand why his house burned down, since understanding in this context clearly would require some conception of how the cause is meant to bring about the effect.

This is yet another reason why understanding should not be thought to be reducible to knowing-why. But it is also another reason for thinking that understanding is a cognitive achievement. For it reinforces the idea that understanding essentially consists of cognitive success—understanding is factive, remember—that is because of cognitive ability. For notice that while the child might acquire knowledge of why his house burned down from my testimony, understanding requires much more than this, which is a genuine conception of how the cause and the effect are related, something which, it turns out, knowledge-why does not demand. Moreover, unlike knowledge, understanding, like cognitive achievements more generally, is consistent with environmental epistemic luck—you don't lose your understanding, or any other cognitive achievement for that matter, just because of the presence of environmental epistemic luck.

If understanding is a cognitive achievement, then it is thereby of distinctive value. As we will now see, this point is important for not only how we think of epistemic value more generally, but also for how we think about the value of inquiry.

11. I noted earlier that the failure of the ‘knowledge as achievement’ thesis to answer the tertiary value problem naturally prompts a revisionary response to the value problem. Knowledge is not distinctively valuable after all, but merely seems to be since it is paradigmatically distinctively valuable. We are now in a position to enhance this revisionary story, for we can further argue that there is an epistemic standing, distinct from knowing but closely related to knowing, which *is* distinctively valuable, and that is understanding. Given the close relationship between knowledge and understanding, the fact that understanding is distinctively valuable can help to explain why we might naturally think that knowledge is distinctively valuable, even though closer inspection of this claim reveals that this is false.

Moreover, I think we can also cast light on why inquiry might be thought to be particularly relevant to the problem of epistemic value. As we have seen, if we regard the product of successful inquiry as simply knowledge, then it isn’t clear how inquiry can contribute to this debate. Given the contrast between understanding and knowledge that has just been defended, however, the possibility opens up of arguing that the product of successful inquiry is not knowledge at all, but rather understanding. Indeed, I think that such a thesis has a great deal of intuitive force.

In order to see this, recall the case just described of my son coming to know why his house burned down while failing to understand why his house burned down. If the product of inquiry is just knowledge, then we ought to regard my son’s coming to know why his house burned down as the product of a successful inquiry. Clearly, however, we would not regard this as the conclusion of a successful inquiry at all. Indeed, the inquiry has stopped too soon.

I think this point often gets obscured by the simple fact that when one thinks of paradigm cases of successful inquiry one imagines an agent who has both knowledge and understanding. By focussing on cases in which only the former is possessed, however, we can come to see that the inquiry in question has not been completed successfully.

Another potential reason why this point might be overlooked could be because of the existence of collaborative inquiries in which the result of the inquiry is not fully understood by all parties to the inquiry because of the different fields of expertise involved. Such inquiries might be thought to constitute a direct refutation of the thesis that understanding is the product of a successful inquiry. In fact, there is no tension between collaborative inquiries and

this thesis. After all, it is surely essential in such cases that at least *some* of the parties fully understand the result of the inquiry if that inquiry is to be deemed successful. For example, imagine an inquiry undertaken by a Nobel Prize winner and her lab assistant which results in an important scientific result. For this inquiry to be successful it is vital that someone—presumably, in this case, the Nobel Prize winning scientist—understands this thesis, even if some parties to the inquiry do not understand it. The product of a successful inquiry, even a collaborative one, is thus still understanding, it is just that in some cases the understanding is not possessed by all parties to that inquiry.

12. I submit, then, that the right way to think about successful inquiry is as specifically aiming at understanding and that, since understanding is distinctively valuable, this has important implications for the debate regarding epistemic value.¹⁷

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NOTES

¹ The use of the word ‘generally’ here is important, since it ought not to be a constraint on an adequate answer to the value problem that it show that knowledge is *always* more valuable than the comparable epistemic standing, in this case true belief. In Pritchard (2007e) I refer to this as the *modest* reading of the value problem, and offer a fuller defence of this reading. Henceforth, I shall take the modest reading of the value problem as given.

² Of course, one might at this juncture opt to take a revisionary line on the value of knowledge, rather than a validatory line, and claim that what is really of distinctive value is just justified true belief, an epistemic standing that could easily be confused with knowledge given that Gettier-style cases are relatively uncommon. This is just the sort of line taken by Kaplan (1985).

³ For further discussion of the primary, secondary and tertiary value problems, see Pritchard (2007c; 2007e).

⁴ I defend this formulation of the value problem further in Pritchard (2007c; 2007e).

⁵ This proposal finds its most explicit expression in the work of Greco (2002; 2007; *forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*), though the original source for this idea is earlier work by Sosa. For Sosa’s most recent statement on this issue, see Sosa (2007, ch. 4). Interestingly, the claim is usually that knowledge, *qua* achievement, is *intrinsically* valuable, but this thesis rests on a confusion between final and intrinsic value. For more discussion of this point, see Pritchard (2007c; 2007e).

⁶ I discuss these issues further in Pritchard (2007e). In order to simplify matters, in what follows I will take it as given that achievements are finally valuable.

⁷ For more on safety, see Sosa (2000) and Pritchard (2002; 2005, ch. 6; 2007a; 2007b).

⁸ Greco (2007; *forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*) offers a response to objections of this sort. For further discussion of this response, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*; cf. Pritchard 2007d; 2007e).

⁹ This example is adapted from one offered by Lackey (2007).

¹⁰ Notice that the claim being made here is only that Jennifer's cognitive success does not constitute a cognitive achievement. In particular, the claim is not that it is of *no* credit at all to Jennifer that she has a true belief, which is the conclusion drawn by Lackey (2007).

¹¹ See Schaffer (2005) for an excellent defence of this thesis.

¹² The *locus classicus* for the reductionist view is Hintikka (1975). See Schaffer (*forthcoming*) for a modification of the reductionist position, albeit one that is very much in the spirit of standard reductionist views.

¹³ Consider the following remark made by Lipton (2004, 30) and quoted in Grimm (2006, 1), for example:

“Understanding is not some sort of super-knowledge, but simply more knowledge: knowledge of causes”. The natural way to read this passage is as suggesting that understanding why one's house burned down is just knowing why it burned down—i.e., knowing that it burned down because of (say) faulty wiring.

¹⁴ It is worth noting the order of explanation here. Whereas one might argue that knowledge is valuable because it is the product of inquiry, the thought in play here would rather be that inquiry is valuable because it results in something distinctively valuable—i.e., understanding.

¹⁵ I further defend the claim that understanding is factive in Pritchard (*forthcominga*). See also Kvanvig (2003) and Grimm (2006). For a defence of the non-factive conception of understanding (bearing in mind that different things are sometimes meant by this term), see Zagzebski (1996), Riggs (*forthcoming*) and Elgin (*forthcoming*).

¹⁶ By failing to recognise this distinction between environmental and intervening epistemic luck, Grimm (2006) ends up arguing that understanding is entirely incompatible with epistemic luck, and thus that it is simply a species of knowledge.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Franck Lihoreau for inviting me to write this paper. An early version of this material was presented at the University of Edinburgh in 2007, and I am grateful to the audience for their feedback. Work on this topic was completed while in receipt of an AHRC research leave award.