

16

Epistemic Value Monism

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI

1 The Value Problem

Where does the state of knowledge get its value? Virtually everyone agrees that it comes partly from the value of the truth that is thereby acquired, but most philosophers also agree that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. If so, what is the source of the extra value that knowledge has? Curiously, several well-known contemporary epistemic theories have trouble answering this question. In particular, I have argued that reliabilism is unable to explain where knowledge gets its value. I call this the value problem.¹ Sosa addresses the value problem in a recent paper, moving his theory in a more Aristotelian direction.² In this chapter I will review the moves Sosa makes to solve the problem and will suggest a simpler approach that I believe does justice to all his desiderata.

Here is a statement of the value problem as I have previously presented it against reliabilism:

- (i) A reliable process or faculty is good only because of the good of its product.

A reliable espresso-maker is good because espresso is good. A reliable water-dripping faucet is not good because dripping water is not good. Reliability *per se* has no value or disvalue. Its value or disvalue derives solely from the value or disvalue of that which it reliably produces.

- (ii) Given that the value of the reliability of a source derives from the value of the product, the value of the product cannot derive additional value from the reliability of the source.

A reliable espresso-maker is good because espresso is good, but the espresso made now doesn't get any better just because it was produced by a reliable espresso machine. The garden I am planting now is no better just because it was planted by a reliable gardener. The pleasure produced now is no better just because it was produced by a reliable source

of pleasure. And so on. The moral is that value can be transferred in one direction only, not back and forth.

- (iii) Hence, a reliable truth-producing faculty or process is good because truth is good. But if I acquire a true belief from such a source, that does not make my belief better than it would be otherwise. A state of true belief resulting from a reliable process or faculty has no more value than mere true belief.
- (iv) But knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.
- (v) Therefore, knowledge cannot be true belief resulting from a reliable process or faculty.

Notice that this argument can be generalized to apply to any theory in which the additional value that a true belief has when it is an instance of knowledge derives from something that in turn derives from the good of truth. The problem therefore arises from the conjunction of the following three claims:

- 1 Knowledge is true belief with property x .
- 2 Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.
- 3 Any epistemic value other than the truth of a belief derives from the good of truth. (Thesis of epistemic value monism.)

Although Sosa's theory is not a pure form of reliabilism, he is attracted to epistemic value monism.³ But any theory that accepts (1)–(3) is prey to the value problem, not just reliabilism. That is because it follows from (1) and (3) that any value x has derives from the value of truth, but if so, it is hard to see how x can add value to a true belief that is x . There is, therefore, a problem in maintaining (2). Sosa is aware of that and has proposed a solution that gives up (3) while continuing to give truth “pride of place” in epistemic value theory.

2 Sosa's Solution

Sosa says that true beliefs attributable to the agent are better than true beliefs that arise in other ways. True beliefs are attributable to the agent when they arise from the agent's own intellectual deeds. Such deeds have what he calls praxical value, a kind of instrumental value. It is the value of bringing about something of value in a way that is attributable to an agent. Since praxical value is a form of instrumental value, it derives from the value of what it produces, in this case, true belief. The praxical value of an intellectual deed in virtue of which we attribute the attainment of truth to the agent is therefore consistent with the thesis of epistemic value monism.

Praxical value does not solve the value problem. The praxical value of an excellent deed that brings about true belief does not enhance the value of the true belief. The excellent performance of an espresso-maker does not enhance the value of the espresso produced. The good espresso in this cup is no better in virtue of the fact that it is attributable to the excellent performance of this espresso-maker. But espresso-makers are not agents and what we value as agents differs from what we value in machines. Sosa concludes that the epistemic value of an intellectual deed that gives the agent the truth is

not limited to extrinsic value deriving from the value of true belief. We value arriving at the truth in a way that is attributed to an agent differently than good espresso attributed to a good espresso-maker.

What, then, is the source of the value of the deed in addition to its instrumental value? Where does the value come from if not from truth? Sosa says the value is intrinsic:

But in addition to the extrinsic praxical value, we seem plausibly committed to the *intrinsic* value of such intellectual deeds. So the grasping of the truth central to truth-connected reliabilist epistemology is not just the truth that may be visited upon our beliefs by happenstance or external agency. We desire rather truth gained through our own performance, and this seems a reflectively defensible desire for a good preferable not just extrinsically but intrinsically. What we prefer is the deed of true believing, where not only the believing but also its truth is attributable to the agent as his or her own doing. (PT, 19)

So intellectual deeds of successfully getting the truth in a way that makes the attainment of truth attributable to the agent have intrinsic value.

But Sosa actually has identified another source of the value of such intellectual deeds. Notice that in the above passage he says that we *prefer* that our successes be due to our own performance rather than by happenstance or some other cause. Three paragraphs earlier he says that we *rationaly* prefer a world in which our true beliefs derive from our own cognitive performances (PT, 18). What makes the preference rational? That a value is intrinsic is only one possible ground for the rationality of preferring it. Sosa has another, although I do not think he notices that they are distinct. He speaks approvingly of Aristotle's view that performances creditable to an agent as his own are components of *eudaimonia*, a good life (PT, 19). So a different reason why it is rational to prefer successes due to our intellectual performances over successes due to some other cause is that the former contributes to a good life. If so, Sosa need not insist that the value of true believing that arises from one's own intellectual performances is intrinsic. He can say instead that it is good extrinsically because of its relation to the good of *eudaimonia*.

Either way, (3) has to go. If knowledge is true belief with property x , and if x is the property of arising from an intellectual source that makes the attainment of truth attributable to the agent, and if the value of x is either intrinsic or valuable as a component of *eudaimonia*, (3) is false. Epistemic value monism must be rejected. Nonetheless, I will argue in section IV below that if Sosa takes the second option, he can maintain a modified form of epistemic value monism. Nonetheless, epistemic value is not monistic. It is not the case that all epistemic goods other than truth derive from the value of truth. This makes our search for the source of epistemic value more complicated.

3 Epistemically Valuable False Beliefs

At this point Sosa has reached the position that knowledge is true belief with property x , and x is the property of arising from an intellectual source in the agent that makes the truth attributable to the agent. But there is a problem with this position. We usually think that there can be false x beliefs. The x part of a false x belief is still good. Sosa anticipates this problem. There is a reason why the truth is attributable to the agent when it arises from the agent's own intellectual performances, and that is that the

performances themselves are excellent. Performances of that kind can be evaluated independently of the environment in which they occur, an environment which determines whether or not the resulting belief is true. So the performance can be evaluated as excellent apart from its actual truth-acquiring consequence. This makes it possible for an intellectually virtuous performance to have value even on those occasions in which it yields a false belief. We think that the agent's performance is admirable because it is one that in a benign world would lead to truth, at least characteristically.

On Sosa's account, the admirability of the intellectual performance is derived from the value of truth even when the resulting belief is false since its admirability derives from the truth that would be acquired when it is "properly installed" in the right environment. In fact, Sosa says that even if an agent's intellectual equipment never is properly installed due to the action of an evil demon, we would still want to be a person whose intellectual performances are good – such that they would lead to the truth in a benign universe (PT, 21).

Notice that since the value of a performance derives from the value of truth, it alone cannot solve the value problem. A true belief deriving from an excellent intellectual performance does not get any extra value from the performance if what makes the performance excellent is just that it is a reliable source of true belief in a benign universe. The value of a performance is needed to explain false x beliefs, but to solve the value problem Sosa needs something else, such as the value he identified earlier in the paper as either intrinsic or contributive to a life of *eudaimonia*.

Sosa concludes that there are four kinds of epistemic value:

- (a) The value of the truth of a belief.
- (b) The praxical, extrinsic value of true believing where the agent brings about the belief. This value derives from the value of truth.
- (c) The eudaimonist, intrinsic value of true believing when getting the truth is attributable to the agent as his own deed.
- (d) The extrinsic value of one's intellectual performance, whether or not the performance leads to the truth, when that performance is such that it would produce the truth if properly installed in a suitable environment (PT, 21–2).

In my view this picture is more complicated than is necessary. The four values are related in ways that beg for a more unified account of the source of epistemic value. Sosa is right that we prefer successes due to our own agency, and even when we are not successful, we prefer to act in ways that in a benign universe *would* be successful. That says more than that we prefer successes and we prefer acts of agency. I think that Sosa's account naturally leads us to the view that we prefer the *organic unity* of true beliefs arising from good intellectual performances. Such a view would permit him to incorporate all four of the values he identifies in a single account of epistemic value.

4 Organic Unities

So far we have seen that Sosa has to reject epistemic value monism in the form of (3) in order to solve the value problem. Not all epistemic value derives from the value of truth.

Nonetheless, there are variations of epistemic value monism that can be saved, if that is what Sosa wants. Take, for instance:

- (4) There is no intrinsic epistemic good other than truth.

Claim (4) does not say that all epistemic value other than truth derives from the value of truth. Claim (4) is compatible with the existence of extrinsic epistemic good that derives from something other than the good of truth, e.g., some non-epistemic good such as *eudaimonia*. Or an epistemic good could be a component of such a non-epistemic good; it can contribute to the value of the whole. Both of these alternatives show that Sosa is not forced to claim that (c), the third epistemic value he identifies above, is intrinsic. Let us take a closer look at the way the value of the parts can contribute to the value of a whole.

Notice first that if contributory value is permitted, it does not follow from (1) and (2) that x has value itself since it is possible that x is valuable only in that it contributes to the value of the whole. So it does not follow from the fact that knowledge is true belief with property x and that knowledge is more valuable than true belief, that the value of knowledge in addition to true belief just is the value of x . That is because the value of a whole may exceed the value of the sum of its parts. This is the theory of organic unities, advocated by G. E. Moore and Franz Brentano.⁴

According to Brentano, the value of a whole may be either greater or less than the value of the sum of its parts. When the value of a whole exceeds the value of the sum of its parts, it may be impossible to assign the additional value of the whole to the contribution made by any given part. An obvious way this can happen is when the additional value arises from a relation among the parts. Brentano maintains, for example, that increasing good is better than decreasing good. Brentano writes: "Let us think of a process which goes from good to bad or one which goes in the opposite direction. The latter shows itself as the one to be preferred. This holds even if the sum of the goods in the one process is equal to that in the other. And our preference in this case is one that we experience as being correct."⁵ What Brentano seems to have in mind here is that we prefer a life in which pleasure continuously increases over one in which pleasure continuously decreases even when the sum total of pleasure in the two alternative lives is equal. The order of the goods affects the value of the whole process, but order itself is neither intrinsically nor extrinsically good. The total intrinsic and extrinsic value of the parts is identical in both processes.⁶

It seems to me that another internal connection between the parts of a whole that can affect the value of the whole is the presence or lack of a causal connection among the parts. The whole consisting of pleasure caused by benevolently motivated acts is better than the value of benevolently motivated acts plus the value of pleasure. A world containing benevolently produced pleasures is a better world than one containing the same quantity of pleasure and the same quantity of benevolently motivated acts, but without a causal connection between the acts and the pleasure. The parallel point applies to a cruel world, a world in which pain is inflicted intentionally. Arguably, a world of pains produced by cruelly motivated acts is worse than a world with the same quantity of pain and the same quantity of cruelly motivated acts, but without a causal connection between them. If this is right, benevolently produced pleasures and cruelly produced pains are organic unities.

The relations among the parts can therefore increase or decrease the value of the whole. Brentano also maintains that parts can contribute to the good of a whole when they are not good themselves. It is even possible that something intrinsically bad can contribute to a larger good. For example, Brentano believes that pleasure is intrinsically good and sorrow is intrinsically bad, yet he also says that wickedness accompanied by sorrow is less bad than wickedness accompanied by pleasure.⁷ (Presumably, he means sorrow over the wickedness.) So something bad can contribute to the good of a whole, as can something good. We have already seen that something evaluatively neutral can contribute to the value of a whole as well. The examples of temporal order and causal connection are probably in that category.

Suppose now that knowledge is an organic unity. Knowledge is an organic unity of x and true belief, where the value of knowledge is more than the sum of the value of x and the value of true belief. This means that either x or truth or some relation between them contributes to the value of the whole in addition to any intrinsic or extrinsic value possessed by x and by truth. I think that Sosa would agree with me that an internal causal connection within the state of knowledge can explain the difference in value. The organic unity of virtuously produced true belief is better than true belief *simpliciter* for the same reason that benevolently produced pleasure is better than pleasure *simpliciter*. Furthermore, the organic unity of virtuously produced true belief is better than true belief plus virtuously motivated performance for the same reason that benevolently produced pleasure is better than pleasure plus benevolently motivated action where there is no causal connection between them.

Compare two worlds, W1 and W2, that have the same number of true and false beliefs and the same number of intellectually virtuous acts. But suppose that in W1 there is no causal relation between the acts and the beliefs, whereas in W2 the true beliefs are virtuously produced. Sosa says we prefer the second, although he commits himself to the paradoxical position that W1 and W2 are equal in value (PT, 8).⁸ I agree that we prefer W2, but there is no need to maintain that W1 and W2 are equal in total value. Even if there is no difference in intrinsic value in the two worlds, the second is a better world as long as virtuously produced true belief is an organic unity.

So my suggestion for Sosa is as follows:

- (a) The truth of a belief is valuable, perhaps intrinsically so.
- (b') Virtuous intellectual performances are extrinsically valuable (derived from the value of truth). This is a value performances can have whether or not they lead to the truth on a given occasion.
- (c') The organic unity of a true belief produced by a virtuous intellectual performance is better than the value of truth plus the value of the performance. That is why knowledge is better than mere true belief.

The answer to the deeper question "Why is the organic unity of knowledge better than the sum of its parts?" should probably be that such an organic unity contributes to a life of *eudaimonia*. The organic unity of virtuously produced true believing is a component of a yet larger organic unity of a good life.⁹

On this proposal Sosa would not be forced to say that the value of getting the truth in a way that is attributable to my own deed is an intrinsic good distinct from the good of

truth. That means he could maintain the form of value monism given in (4), although he must still reject (3), and on the proposal I made in the preceding paragraph, he also has to give up the idea that epistemic value is an autonomous kind of value. Knowledge is valuable because it is a component of *eudaimonia*, a life that is ethically valuable. But as far as I can see, he has already given up the autonomy of epistemic value anyway. Still, since Sosa apparently wishes to defend some form of epistemic value monism, I think he can get it in the form of (4).

If Sosa accepts my suggestion that the value of knowledge should be understood as an organic unity, that would also resolve his apparent ambivalence about the intrinsic value of truth. He points out that some truths are trivial (PT, 2, 5). In fact, he seems to think that the value of true believing is conditional on certain interests (PT, 4). Alternatively, he sometimes speaks as if true believing is good in so far as it contributes to a life of *eudaimonia* (PT, 19). That suggests that he would prefer to say that the truth of a belief has only contributory value, not intrinsic value, although he seems tempted to call it intrinsic in one place (PT, 19). If it is not intrinsic, neither component value in knowledge would be intrinsic, nor need either be extrinsic. Both might have only contributory value. I think this is a perfectly coherent position, and if it is what Sosa has in mind, the dependence of epistemic value on some non-epistemic value to which it contributes would be obvious. But Sosa need not go so far as to deny the intrinsic value of true believing. The value of the truth of a belief can be intrinsic even if it is trivial and its more interesting value is contributory. As far as I can see, the theory of organic unities is the best way to understand this.

In short, Sosa must give up epistemic value monism in the form of (3) in order to solve the value problem. Nevertheless, he is not forced to maintain that there is another intrinsic epistemic value such as the value of true believing when getting the truth is attributed to one's intellectual deeds. If knowledge is true belief with property x , the value of knowledge can exceed the value of truth plus the value of x . The value of truth may be intrinsic or merely contributory to the organic whole. The value of x also may be intrinsic, extrinsic (because it is derived from the value of truth), or merely contributory to the whole. In any case, the value of the whole exceeds the value of the sum of the parts. The solution to the value problem is that knowledge is an organic unity.

5 Gettier

It is a good idea to think of knowledge as an organic unity for a completely different reason. That is Gettier problems. I have argued previously that Gettier-style counterexamples can be given for any theory according to which knowledge is true belief plus x , where the truth is not entailed by x .¹⁰ As long as it is possible for there to be a false x belief, a counterexample can be generated following this recipe: Find a false x belief. Then amend the situation to make the belief true for reasons that have nothing to do with x . The belief will then be true and will be x , but will not be knowledge. This means that x cannot be a component of knowledge independent of truth. On the other hand, as we have seen above, it does seem intuitively right that there can be beliefs that are just as epistemically admirable as ordinary cases of knowledge except that they are false. Is there a way to satisfy both intuitions in a single account of knowledge?

Yes, there is. I have proposed that in instances of knowledge the truth is reached *because of* the other epistemically valuable components of the state of knowledge. What I call an act of intellectual virtue is an act that reaches the truth because of the intellectually virtuous motives and behavior of the agent.¹¹ And, as we have seen, Sosa's new account of the value of knowledge has a similar feature. He insists that we value getting the truth in a way that is attributed to our own intellectual deeds. We ought to conclude, then, that it is misleading to formally define knowledge as true belief plus x , where x designates the epistemically valuable ingredients in knowledge other than truth. Rather, x is the property of getting the truth because of those ingredients. It is possible to have the ingredients without getting the truth, but getting the truth and having the ingredients is not sufficient for knowledge. Knowledge is getting the truth because of the ingredients. Knowledge is true belief acquired in a valuable way, a way that is to the agent's credit.¹²

Let me now summarize my recommendations for Sosa:

- (1) The assumption that knowledge is true belief with property x does not have the consequence that the value of knowledge is the same as the value of truth plus the value of x . Knowledge may be an organic unity.
- (2) Epistemic value monism based on the value of truth is false.
- (3) Even if the truth of a belief is intrinsically valuable, it is still possible that there is no other intrinsic epistemic value.
- (4) The value problem, as well as Gettier problems, lead in the direction of understanding the evaluative components of knowledge as causally connected, particularly in a way that makes the successful attainment of truth the result of the agent's own doing, and hence, something for which she can be commended. I think, then, that Sosa and I are in agreement that knowledge is a state of believing in which the agent reaches truth in valuable way w . We can, of course, debate about the substance of way w , but I suggest that any viable account of knowledge will have this form.

Notes

- 1 I raised this problem briefly in *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 301–2. The more detailed argument reviewed here appears in “From Reliabilism to Virtue Epistemology,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Philosophy 1998: Epistemology* (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2000), reprinted in an expanded version in *Knowledge, Belief, and Character*, ed. Guy Axtell (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- 2 “The Place of Truth in Epistemology,” forthcoming in Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) (cited as PT). Page numbers refer to the typescript.
- 3 Sosa knows that there may be epistemic values such as understanding which may not be directly related to the value of truth, but he is leaving these aside. See PT, note 5.
- 4 A good discussion of Brentano's version of the theory appears in R. M. Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 7. Moore had the idea earlier and called Brentano's attention to the need for organic unities in his review of the

first edition of Brentano's *The Origin of Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. See Chisholm, p. 69, note 1.

- 5 See Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value*, p. 71.
- 6 I distinguish intrinsic and extrinsic good differently than does either Moore or Brentano, but that should not matter for the point of this chapter.
- 7 Chisholm, *Brentano and Intrinsic Value*, p. 72.
- 8 Sosa says that worlds are evaluated by total intrinsic value even though particular events are evaluated by taking into account instrumental value.
- 9 Alternatively, he could say the organic unity of knowledge is instrumentally good, leading to a life of *eudaimonia*, but I find that less plausible.
- 10 "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems," *Philosophical Quarterly* (January 1994); also in *Virtues of the Mind*, Part III, sec. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 11 *Virtues of the Mind*.
- 12 Wayne Riggs and John Greco have similar positions. See Riggs, "Reliability and the Value of Knowledge," forthcoming, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*; and Greco, "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in DePaul and Zagzebski, *Intellectual Virtue*.