

# Knowledge and the Motive for Truth

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## 1. *The motive for truth in our epistemic lives*

I assume that a self-conscious being is both conscious of the world and conscious of itself being conscious of the world. Because we are self-conscious, we reflect upon our own conscious states, not because we are especially interested in ourselves, but because we think that in doing so we can monitor and improve the connection between those states and their objects in the world. The material upon which we reflect is what we find in our pre-reflective consciousness--our memories, pre-reflective beliefs, and emotions. It also includes trust in the natural attunement of our faculties to reality. Trust is as much a part of our basic endowment as our faculties of perception and reasoning. Our pre-reflective trust is one of the things upon which we reflect when we attempt to monitor the relation between our conscious states and the world.

When we reflect, we realize that we have no non-circular way to tell that our faculties have anything to do with the way the world is, so either we turn our pre-reflective trust into reflective trust, or we become skeptics. My view is that the right response to epistemic circularity is to trust reflectively. The point of reflection is to increase the trustworthiness of our faculties, but we can only do that by using those same faculties in an especially careful and directed way. Reflection makes the connection between our faculties and the world more accurate by increasing the coherence of the outputs of those faculties. If we were living in an Evil Genius world, being conscientious would not increase the trustworthiness of our faculties. In fact, if we were right in our pre-reflective state only a small percentage of the time – say 10%, then careful reflection on the outputs of our faculties could not increase their reliability sufficiently to make them trustworthy. The best we can do is to be reflective, but since most of what we reflect about is, or depends upon, what is

unreflective, being reflective is only helpful if we can generally trust our unreflective selves. We must think, then, that our perceptual experiences are generally veridical and our pre-reflective beliefs are generally true. If they were not, then when we are conscientious in the use of our faculties, it would not be reasonable to think that the outcome is truth.

Reflection brings fully to consciousness the use of our faculties and their connection with their ends. The natural end of belief is truth. To believe is to think something is true. When we reflect, we think about the way in which we acquired a belief, or we think about its support from other beliefs and experiences, or the beliefs and experiences of others whom we trust upon reflection. We think that such reflection will lead us to do a better job of having true beliefs. What I mean by *epistemic conscientiousness* is doing reflectively what we do unreflectively. What is added is an awareness of our epistemic end—the truth, and the attempt to reach that end as well as we can. The motive for truth does not appear only at the reflective level; it was there all along. But it becomes an object of awareness at the reflective level. The epistemically conscientious person has a reflective motive for truth and reflectively guides her epistemic behavior by trying her best to reach the end of that motive.

Aquinas says we always act “under the aspect of good,” (*De Veritate* q. 22, a.1), and I would say that similarly, we always believe under the aspect of true. We are not usually aware of the way we think that something we are doing aims at the good, but when we reflect about our acts, we bring into consciousness the end of good and the way in which what we are doing does or does not reach that end. Similarly, when we reflect about our beliefs, we bring into consciousness the natural end of the true and the way in which what we are doing cognitively does or does not succeed in reaching that end. The phenomenon of epistemic circularity reveals that even though our epistemic end is independent of our consciousness, the only way we can tell that we have reached our epistemic end is by the reflective use of our faculties consciously aimed at truth.

Reflection shows us that other people are often better at getting truth than we are

ourselves. The human community has developed norms of reasoning by reflection upon the connection between what we do cognitively and what we later, upon reflection, judge as successful. These norms have been codified into rules. The human community has also identified intellectual traits that we reflectively judge make us more successful at getting truth - or reaching other epistemic ends, such as understanding. We call these intellectual virtues. The intellectual virtues are qualities of reflective agents in their attempts to reach their epistemic ends. These traits require basic trust in our faculties, and they would not be virtuous unless our faculties were basically trustworthy.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *What is special about knowledge?*

For millennia reflective humans have attempted to distinguish success in getting truth from a higher level state of getting truth. I do not know whether it is natural to desire a state higher than true belief, but such a desire certainly appears at the reflective level. Ever since Plato it has been thought that there is a state of getting the truth in a particularly good way, a way that is good enough to be worth considerable effort to obtain it. But the fact that we identify and analyze knowledge at the reflective level does not mean that knowledge only exists at the reflective level. Although knowledge is worth effort, it does not necessarily require effort. It might not even require reflection. If we look at the history of philosophy, we see a division on this issue. What Plato called “*episteme*” and Aquinas called “*scientia*” was a state that demanded considerable reflection and cognitive effort. What most contemporary philosophers call “knowledge” does not. So contemporary epistemologists typically treat simple, true perceptual beliefs in ordinary conditions as knowledge, whereas typical ancient and medieval philosophers did not. I suspect that there is no determinate

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the argument of the foregoing section comes from my book, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2012. That book is about managing our psychic lives. It is not about knowledge.

answer to the question whether Plato and Aquinas differ from contemporary philosophers on the analysis of the same epistemic state, or whether ancient and medieval philosophers were simply talking about a different epistemic state than the one that has received the most attention in contemporary epistemology. But I also think that the answer to this question is not very important. If there are a number of good kinds of distinguishable states of believing the truth, it is worth calling attention to them, whether or not they all fall under the class of states of knowing.

I said above that there is a pre-reflective desire for truth as well as a reflectively conscious desire for truth. It is not natural for us to be reflectively conscious all the time, and it is not natural for us to be reflectively guided by the motive for truth all the time. Even when we are unreflective, some ways of getting the truth are better than others, and it is a good idea to call attention to the difference. Some virtue epistemologists have identified knowledge with using our faculties in a way that makes the success of getting the truth credited to the agent rather than to luck or to some external cause, and on this view, unreflective true beliefs can qualify as knowledge. (See, for instance, Riggs 1998), Greco 2003), Sosa 2003). My view is that getting to the truth through the reflective use of our faculties is a higher level epistemic state than getting to the truth through the unreflective use of our faculties, but I agree that the latter is better than getting to the truth through luck or some way that is not due to the use of our faculties. So there are at least three levels of getting the truth, and there are at least two places at which we can draw the line between knowledge and a lesser state. Ernest Sosa (2007) has drawn the line in both places and calls one “reflective knowledge” and the other “animal knowledge.” Put simply, reflective knowledge is reflective true belief, animal knowledge is unreflective true belief that is credited to one’s perceptual and epistemic faculties, and mere true belief that is not credited to one’s faculties is not knowledge.

I have no objections to drawing the distinction between knowledge and lesser states

this way as long as reflective knowledge does not disappear from epistemological discussion. Given what I have said so far, I think we can conclude that being epistemically reflective is a good thing. My view is that it not only makes us more likely to reach our epistemic end, it is essential to self-governance. When we believe reflectively, we own our beliefs in a way that parallels our ownership of the acts we perform reflectively. We not only make it more likely that our states will bear the right relation to an external world, we also make it more likely that we will have a unified self. I think, then, that the value of believing reflectively is undeniable, but as I have said, I cannot see anything that forces us to connect that state with knowledge and I doubt that there is a single state that legitimately falls under the heading “knowledge.”

There are many different good ways to believe. We can be good by satisfying internalist norms. We can be good by having the proper external relation to the ground of truth. We can be good by having intellectual virtues. We can be good because we are fortunate enough to have a properly functioning endowment in a benign world. The *particular* way our belief states are good in a state of knowledge is partly a matter of theoretical decision, but our decision is guided by certain theoretical desiderata. I suggest that we want our definition to capture our most important epistemic values, we want it to have roughly the same extension as other contemporary definitions, and we want to avoid classic objections to previous definitions such as Gettier problems. I would also add a practical aim: We want to find a definition that is not only theoretically explanatory, but is also practically useful, one that has a direct connection with the things we can do ourselves to achieve knowledge.

### 3. *Knowledge as a state acquired by a conscientious agent*

I propose that knowledge is the epistemically conscientious attainment of truth. It is a state in which we get to the truth by governing our epistemic lives well. Epistemic

conscientiousness is the desire for truth brought to reflective awareness, accompanied by using one's faculties as well as one can to satisfy that desire. In my recent short book, *On Epistemology*, I proposed the following definition:

Knowledge is belief in which the believer gets to the truth because she acts in an epistemically conscientious way.<sup>2</sup>

Epistemic conscientiousness in my sense requires caring about truth, but not necessarily caring about truth for its own sake. (p. 126).<sup>3</sup> The intellectual virtues are traits of intellectual character that an epistemically conscientious person would attempt to develop and would admire in others. These qualities do not necessarily require intellectual discipline. As I have said, a conscientious person has general epistemic self-trust. The phenomenon of epistemic circularity means that either a reflective person must have self-trust or succumb to skepticism. Some of the virtues restrain self-trust (e.g., attentiveness, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual fairness). Other virtues enhance self-trust (e.g., intellectual courage, perseverance, firmness). But none of these traits would be virtues if basic self-trust were not the stance of the conscientious person. That is because the reflective person is aware that she is wasting her time in being attentive, open to the views of others, courageous, persevering, etc., unless her faculties are basically trustworthy.

I think that this definition satisfies a number of desiderata in a definition of knowledge. It avoids Gettier problems; it identifies a feature of knowing that makes it better than mere true believing; it has the practical advantage of connecting norms of reasoning and

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<sup>2</sup>Zagzebski 2008, Chap 5, p. 127. I say that defining knowledge as reaching the truth because of intellectually virtuous activity roughly coincides with the definition above, but I do not investigate the particular cases in which the definitions may come apart.

<sup>3</sup>In the first chapter of *On Epistemology*, I argue that caring about anything logically commits us to caring about the truth, but it does not commit us to caring about truth for its own sake. The argument of that chapter is largely taken from Zagzebski 2004.

the intellectual virtues with the good-making features of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In *On Epistemology* I said that I would not maintain that satisfaction of the conditions given in the definition is necessary for knowledge, only that it is sufficient. I have already mentioned that the issue of whether reflection is necessary for knowledge has changed in the history of investigation of knowledge, so the connection between reflection and the definition above needs to be examined. There is also the issue of counter-motives, or motives opposed to the motive for truth, and whether they affect the conditions for knowing. So there are at least two types of cases in which the conditions given in my definition appear to be unnecessary for knowledge. These are cases in which the believer is (a) un-reflective, or (b) reflective but vicious in reaching the truth.

The first kind of case is one that I call “easy knowledge.” It is a situation in which a person forms a true belief on the basis of simple perception or memory or testimony, and does so automatically, with no reflection. In standard cases of these kinds, many philosophers claim that the person knows. For instance, I wake up in the morning, see sunlight, and believe that the sun is up, or I recall that today is my sister’s birthday and believe it without any reflection between the act of remembering and the act of believing. Or my neighbor tells me that they are going out of town. I believe what she tells me immediately, without any intermediate steps. In each case, it is tempting to say my belief state is good enough for knowledge, provided the belief is true. I know that the sun is up. I know that today is my sister’s birthday. I know that the neighbors are going out of town.

In *On Epistemology* I argued that easy knowledge is not ruled out by the definition above. An epistemically conscientious person has basic self-trust and is not continuously reflective. She need not engage in the special cognitive discipline of following norms of

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<sup>4</sup>I discuss the ways a definition can avoid Gettier problems and the value problem in *On Epistemology*, Chap. 5, and argue that the definition above is one way to avoid both problems (p. 127).

reasoning that require conscious attention, nor need she exemplify virtuous habits when the discipline of the virtues is not called for, but she would do so in the relevant counterfactual circumstances. (p. 128). The epistemically conscientious person monitors her cognitive activity, reflecting when she is aware of cues that call into question either her basic self-trust, her trust in others, or trust in her environment. A conscientious person does reflect upon her beliefs from time to time. She expects her beliefs to survive conscientious self-reflection. But it is not necessary to engage in self-reflection about every belief that would survive such reflection. To do so would be to succumb to a kind of intellectual neurosis. Managing our cognitive lives appropriately does not mean reflecting on each and every belief at the time it is formed. But if what we *would* do in relevant counterfactual circumstances is important, then what we *do* do when those circumstances arise is also important. In this way, what I do on other occasions of forming beliefs is relevant to the issue whether my belief now is an instance of knowledge.

The same response applies to the case of viciously motivated believer. A knower need not be motivated to get truth for its own sake, and she need not be reflectively aware of the desire for truth every time she gets knowledge. She need not directly engage the motives that are the components of the intellectual virtues on each occasion in which she obtains knowledge, and she need not refer to the norms of reasoning in order to be a conscientious believer. But if knowledge is the result of the conscientious governance of our epistemic lives, the place of the virtues in conscientiousness is important. Most of the virtues aid our self-governance by acting as constraints on or enhancements of what we do naturally and unreflectively. The parallel point applies to moral virtues. It does not count against an agent's virtue if she does not directly engage the motives of the various virtues every time she acts, but if she is virtuous, she is disposed to do so when the appropriate occasion arises. She may believe upon reflection that many classes of her acts succeed at reaching their ends when she is acting unreflectively, but she is alert to features of a situation that call for reflection and



require her to exercise the discipline of the virtues. But if she acted against the virtues, we would think that counts against the fact that she is morally conscientious. Similarly, if she flagrantly violates the norms of reasoning, or acquires a belief in a way that is close-minded, intellectually arrogant, inattentive, or sloppy, she has done something unconscientious, and consequently she has risked losing the truth. These constraints are vague because there are many virtues and many norms of reasoning, and there are many ways in which an agent can violate them. Some ways are not very serious; others are much more so. The vagueness in the notion of believing conscientiously leads to vagueness in the application of my definition of knowledge. Since there are degrees of good believing, it is probably not surprising that there are degrees of epistemically valuable states of true believing, and in this way there are degrees of knowledge.

Let me end by summarizing my position on the place of motivation in knowledge. We desire truth at the pre-reflective level, and at the level we have trust in our epistemic faculties for the end of getting truth. A reflective person makes the desire for truth conscious and acquires reflective self-trust. What I mean by epistemic conscientiousness is the reflective awareness of the desire for truth, and the reflective attempt to satisfy that desire as well as one can. I suggest that knowledge, in at least one of its senses, is the conscientious satisfaction of the desire for truth. I have argued that this definition does not rule out easy knowledge obtained from perception, memory, or testimony, but it does rule out true belief that is unconscientiously acquired through the exercise of intellectual vice or disregard of the rules of conscientious reasoning.

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