

# The Value Problem of Knowledge. Against a Reliabilist Solution

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**Abstract.** A satisfying theory of knowledge has to explain why knowledge seems to be better than mere true belief. In this paper, I try to show that the best reliabilist explanation (ERA+) is still not able to solve this problem. According to an already elaborated answer (ERA), it is better to possess knowledge that  $p$  because this makes likely that one's future belief of a similar kind will also be true. I begin with a metaphysical comment which gives birth to ERA+, a better formulation of ERA. Then, I raise two objections against ERA+. The first objection shows that the truth of the reliabilist answer requires the conception of a specific theory of instrumental value. In the second objection, I present an example in order to show that ERA+ actually fails to explain why it is better to possess knowledge than a mere true belief.

## 1 Introduction: the Value Problem of Knowledge

Why is it better to know that  $p$  than to possess a mere true belief that  $p$ ?<sup>1</sup> The problem of the value of knowledge constitutes one of the main issue in contemporary epistemology. The intuition<sup>2</sup> that it is better to possess knowledge than mere true belief has an important historical precedent. It arouses Socrates' astonishment in Plato's *Meno*. As Plato notices, it is not possible to account for this intuition merely by appealing to its distinctive utility. Indeed, a true belief about the way to go to Larissa is as useful as a piece of knowledge about the way to go to Larissa. Plato's explanation consists then in insisting on the stability of knowledge in comparison to true belief. Briefly said, when one possesses one piece of knowledge about the way to go to Larissa, one is less likely to abandon one's belief if the road seems to take the wrong direction. When one possesses knowledge, one is more confident, one is less easily destabilized and this is the reason why it is better to know that  $p$  than to believe truly that  $p$ .

Plato was concerned by the different *practical* value of knowledge in comparison to true belief. The contemporary debate focuses on the distinctive *epistemic* values of knowledge and true belief. This means that a contemporary solution will try to appeal

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presupposes that the general idea that knowledge is something more than mere true belief is correct. As Edmund Gettier pointed out, knowledge is also very probably something more than justified true belief. If a theory of knowledge is not able to explain why knowledge is better than mere true belief, it is also unable to explain why knowledge is better than justified true belief. For this reason, showing that reliabilism is not able to explain why knowledge is better than mere true belief allows one to conclude that it is not able solve the value problem in general.

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, another conceivable solution to the problem of the value of knowledge consists in arguing that the intuition is illusory.

exclusively to epistemic values<sup>3</sup> —mainly truth— and not to practical values —as utility— to explain why it is better to possess knowledge than mere true belief. Then, the contemporary debates is not perfectly pointed by our initial question but more accurately by the following:

(Q) Why is it epistemically better to know that  $p$  than to possess a mere true belief that  $p$ ?

A satisfying theory of knowledge has to answer this question.

## 2 The Reliabilist Answer to the Value Problem

### 2.1 The Immediate Reliabilist Answer

Roughly, according to process reliabilism (Goldman 1979), a piece of knowledge consists in a true belief being produced by a reliable process. The immediate reliabilist answer to the value problem follows directly from this conception of knowledge.

1. Truth is a value;
2. A true belief is valuable in virtue of being true;
3. A reliable process has instrumental value in virtue of causing a true belief;
4. A piece of knowledge has more value than a mere true belief because a piece of knowledge is not only constituted by a true belief which has intrinsic value, it is also constituted by the reliable process which has instrumental value.

### 2.2 The Swamping Objection

The immediate reliabilist answer has received a serious objection most famously known as the *swamping objection*.<sup>4</sup>

The swamping objection denies that a state of affairs  $e$  which consists in a valuable state produced by a reliable process  $p$  is more valuable than a state of affairs  $e'$  which consists in a valuable state of the same type produced by an unreliable process  $p'$ .

The objection becomes clear through an analogy. The following is Zagzebski's analogy (Zagzebski 2000, 2003). The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a tasteful cup of coffee produced by a reliable process  $p$ , by a coffee machine which generally produces tasteful coffees does not possess more value than the state of affairs  $e'$  consisting in a tasteful coffee produced by an unreliable coffee machine  $p'$ . Both coffees are identically tasteful and this is the only parameter that counts in their comparative evaluation. Indeed, the instrumental value that the reliable process  $p$  is supposed to add to the value of the state of affairs  $e$  is *swamped* by the fact that the coffee is already tasteful.

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<sup>3</sup> In the following paper, I simplify the expressions “epistemic value”, “epistemically valuable”, etc, by speaking only of “value”, “valuable”, etc.

<sup>4</sup> In the contemporary debate, the copyright of the swamping objection is very often attributed to Linda Zagzebski (Zagzebski 2000, 2003). As Goldman and Olsson pointed out (Goldman & Olsson forthcoming), Richard Swinburn had already raised this objection (Swinburn 1999).

In more general terms, the instrumental value of a reliable process  $p$ , i.e. the value that a process has in virtue of being likely to produce valuable states of a certain type, cannot be taken into account when one evaluates the total value of a state of affairs  $e$  which consists in a valuable state of this type which has been produced by a reliable process  $p$ . The instrumental value of  $p$  cannot be taken into account in the evaluation of  $e$  because this instrumental value is *swamped* by the fact that the produced state is already valuable.

Hence, reliabilism is wrong to appeal to the instrumental value of a reliable process to explain the additional value of the reliably produced true belief. Indeed, like in the coffees' analogy, the instrumental value that the reliable epistemic process is supposed to add to the true belief that it produces is *swamped* by the fact that the belief produced is already true.

Erik Olsson (Olsson 2006) summarizes the swamping objection in perfectly clear terms: "All additional instrumental epistemic value accruing to a particular case of reliable production would have to come from that very belief that was reliably produced; but if that belief is already true, there is no room for reliable production to contribute instrumental epistemic value."

### 2.3 The Elaborated Reliabilist Answer (ERA)

Alvin Goldman and Erik Olsson (Goldman & Olsson forthcoming) defend a more elaborated answer to the value problem which avoids the swamping objection.

The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a true belief produced by a reliable process  $p$  has more value than the state of affairs  $e'$  consisting in a mere true belief because

- (1) Truth is a value;
- (2) The property of making it likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true is a valuable property to possess, in virtue of (1);
- (3) The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a true belief produced by a reliable process  $p$  makes likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true;
- (4) The state of affairs  $e'$  consisting in a true belief does not make likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true
- (5) The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a true belief produced by a reliable process  $p$  has additional value in virtue of possessing this property.

This answer avoids the swamping objection since the value that a state of affairs  $e$  possesses in virtue of exemplifying this property is not swamped by the fact that the belief which constitutes  $e$  is already true. Indeed, the state of affairs  $e$  draws its additional value from the value of the future true beliefs of a similar kind.

## 3 A Metaphysical Requirement

It is fruitful to consider the elaborated reliabilist answer ERA from a metaphysical point of view. Which kinds of things could be the bearers of the property of enhancing the probability of future true beliefs?

Contrary to what Goldman and Olsson (Goldman & Olsson forthcoming) seem to do, it is incorrect to attribute this property to the state of affairs consisting in a par-

particular state of affairs produced by a particular reliable process. Such a particular state of affairs does not make likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true. When one subject  $x$  possesses such a reliably produced belief, this gives maybe a reason to think that  $x$  possesses a reliable epistemic disposition whose exercises are likely to produce true beliefs. But it is only the possession of such a reliable epistemic disposition—for example, the reliable disposition of perceiving things in the darkness—which enhances the probability of subsequent true beliefs and which can be identified as the bearer of this property.

Since the state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a particular true belief produced by a particular reliable process, i.e. a piece of knowledge, cannot be conceived as the bearer of the valuable property, ERA has to be formulated differently:

A better elaborated reliabilist answer (ERA+)

The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a true belief produced by a reliable process  $p$  has more value than the state of affairs  $e'$  consisting in a mere true belief because

- (1) Truth is a value
- (2) The property of making it likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true is a valuable property to have, in virtue of (1);
- (3) The state of affairs  $E$  consisting in the possessing of a reliable epistemic disposition has the property of making likely that one's future beliefs of a similar kind will also be true;
- (4) The state of affairs  $E$  consisting in the possessing of a reliable epistemic disposition is a valuable state of affairs in virtue of having this property;
- (5) The state of affairs  $e$  consisting in a true belief produced by the exercise of a reliable epistemic disposition is also valuable in virtue of being constituted by the exercise of such a valuable disposition.

The clause (5) explains how  $e$  draws its value from the valuable property of enhancing the probability of subsequent true beliefs without exemplifying it. In Goldman and Olsson (forthcoming), one finds an explanation of the same kind but, curiously, this explanation is not given in reaction to the metaphysical requirement. This explanation is presented as a “second solution” to the swamping objection.

This “second solution” consists in distinguishing two kinds of value instrumentalism —token instrumentalism and type instrumentalism— and in claiming then that the additional value of knowledge is explained by applying the type instrumentalism.

Token instrumentalism:

A process is instrumentally good in accordance with the token instrumentalism if it derives its positive value from the goodness of its effects.

Process instrumentalism:

A process is instrumentally good in accordance with the type instrumentalism if it derives its positive value from the goodness of the effects which other processes of the same type are likely to produce.

For instance, according to the token instrumentalism, a reliable surgical procedure which fails does not have any instrumental value. But, according to the type instru-

mentalism, the procedure *does* have an instrumental value. The particular procedure draws its value from the value of the recoveries that other procedures of the same type are likely to produce. In an analogous way, a particular reliable epistemic process derives its instrumental value from the value of the true beliefs that other processes of the same type are likely to produce. A particular epistemic process does not derive its instrumental value from the value of the particular true belief it produces. In this way, the “second solution” avoids the swamping objection.

I think that Goldman and Olsson’s “second solution” should be rather considered as an improvement of their first solution which tries to conciliate the metaphysical requirement. Like ERA+, their “second solution” explains how a particular true belief produced by a particular process can derive its value from the value of other subsequent true beliefs.

Nevertheless, my goal here is not to consider the details of these different explanations. I have insisted on the necessity to formulate the reliabilist answer by taking into account the metaphysical requirement because I think that such a formulation teaches us something important about this answer. When one formulates the elaborated reliabilist in this way, it becomes patent that the possession of a disposition to acquire further true beliefs is necessary to explain why it is better to possess knowledge than a mere true belief. Then, according to a reliabilist answer which take into account the metaphysical requirement, a subject *S* who possesses a piece of knowledge is necessary in the following epistemic situation:

- (i) *S* possesses a true belief and;
- (ii) *S* possesses a valuable epistemic disposition which makes her likely to acquire future true beliefs of the same kind.

The possession of such a valuable disposition is a necessary constituent of the epistemic situation of the subject who knows because it is necessary to explain the additional value of knowledge in comparison to true belief.

## 4 Objections

### 4.1 The One Shot Objection

Bob is a very passionate entomologist. He devoted his life to study two kinds of Brazilian spiders which are both very rare and very similar. Thanks to his work, he is able to distinguish one spider of the first kind from one of the other if he should meet one. When he is 90 and very sick, he realizes that he has never seen one of these spiders although he spent more than 20 years in the jungle hoping to observe one of them. He decides to travel a last time to Brazil. By cutting a path in the jungle with difficulty, he comes across one spider of the first kind and acquires the true belief that this is a spider of the first kind. Bob flies back to London and dies some days later.

This example puts a finger on a difficulty for reliabilism. From a reliabilist point of view, Bob’s true belief about the spider is certainly a piece of knowledge since it has been produced by a reliable process. Moreover, it is certainly better to possess this true belief owing to years of efforts than to possess the same true belief by chance.

Nevertheless, ERA is not able to explain why Bob's knowledge has more value than a true belief acquired accidentally since it is not true that Bob's reliably produced true belief makes him likely to have further true beliefs of the same type. Indeed, when Bob sees the spider, it is already certain that he will never see other spiders of this kind since he will never go back to Brazil.

Does ERA+ score better? According to ERA+, a particular true belief produced by the exercise of a reliable epistemic disposition draws its own value from the value which characterizes this disposition. The epistemic disposition is instrumentally valuable. It derives its value from the value of the true beliefs which it makes likely to produce. Hence, at last, the particular true belief produced by a reliable process derives its value from the value of these other true beliefs. Until now, I have not marked whether these other true beliefs are *actual* true beliefs or *potential* true beliefs. This question has some influence on the ability of ERA+ to answer the one shot objection. Indeed, if one claims that the disposition derives its value from the value of the other *actual* true beliefs which this disposition makes one likely to produce, then ERA+ is not able to answer the one shot objection since Bob's disposition does not make him likely to possess other actual true beliefs of the same type. To save ERA+, the reliabilism has to say that the epistemic disposition derives its value from the other *potential* true beliefs which this disposition makes one likely to produce.<sup>5</sup>

This claim presupposes a theory of value according to which instrumental value can be derived from the value of potential states of affairs. Maybe, it is possible to elaborate such a theory of value but, in any case, it would be a hard task to carry out. Indeed, such a theory runs the risk of attributing instrumental value to states of affairs which are valueless. For instance, my sweater being red is potentially able to save me from being run over by a car but, as long as it does not *actually* save me from such an accident, it seems very strange to attribute some instrumental value to it. The one shot objection is probably not a determinate objection against the best reliabilist answer ERA+ but it makes clear that such an answer requires the elaboration of a theory of value which explains how to attribute instrumental value in virtue of the value of potential states of affairs.

## 4.2 The Competent Omniscient Objection<sup>6</sup>

The Competent Omniscient (CO) and the Lucky Omniscient (LO) are two supernatural beings living in the same world. They differ only with respect to their epistemic situations.

The epistemic situation of the Competent Omniscient is the following:

- (a) CO possesses all the true belief it is ever possible to possess.
- (b) CO's true beliefs result from his perfectly reliable faculties and hence, CO's true beliefs are pieces of knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> As Goldman and Olsson point out (Goldman & Olsson forthcoming), the same thing is true concerning the solution which appeals to type instrumentalism.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Olivier Massin for the conception of this objection.

The epistemic situation of CO is such that it is not only *actually* true that the faculties of CO produce further true beliefs but it is also *impossible* that CO's faculties produce further true beliefs.

The epistemic situation of the Lucky Omniscient is the following:

- (a') LO possesses all the true belief it is ever possible to possess.
- (b') LO does not possess any epistemic faculties. It is only by accident that LO possesses all the true beliefs it is ever possible to possess. LO's true beliefs do not constitute pieces of knowledge.

I do not see why the Platonic intuition would not be valid when one evaluates the epistemic states of CO. Why the intuition which is uppermost for the piece of knowledge of a subject who do not have all the possible true beliefs would suddenly be invalid for the pieces of knowledge of a subject who possesses all the true beliefs it is ever possible to have. We really have the intuition that CO's true beliefs are better than LO'S true beliefs. Nevertheless, the reliabilist answer is not able to explain why it is the case since, in this situation, it is not even possible to appeal to the value of *potential* further true beliefs.

## 5 Conclusions

By deriving the entire value of knowledge from the value of the truths it promotes, the reliabilist answer fails to account for another important intuition which pushes us to evaluate knowledge as a better epistemic state than a mere true belief.

A subject *S* seems to possess knowledge only when *S* "has a lot to do" with her possession of a true belief. When a subject *S* possesses a true belief only accidentally, without playing a salient role in the occurrence of her true belief (Greco 2002), for instance in Gettier-cases, we do not attribute knowledge to *S*. This characteristic of knowledge is able to explain why it constitutes a better epistemic state than a mere true belief (Greco 2002, forthcoming, Pritchard forthcoming, Riggs 2002, Sosa 2003). Shortly, knowledge is better than a mere true belief as the victory of Rodgeur Federer is better than the same victory achieved just by luck, by a tennis player without talent. It seems than a valuable state of affairs has still more value when a subject can be held responsible for its occurrence than when its occurrence is due to mere luck.

Moreover, the objection of the Competent Omniscient shows that an appeal to this characteristic of knowledge is sometimes the only way to explain the additional value of knowledge in comparison to true belief. Indeed, the epistemic situation of CO and the epistemic situation of LO diverge only with respect to this characteristic. CO has a lot to do with the possession of his true beliefs and this is what explains why CO's epistemic situation is better than LO's.

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