

# THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

ALAN MILLAR AND JONATHAN L. KVANVIG

I—ALAN MILLAR

## WHY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

An explanation is given of why it is in the nature of inquiry into whether or not  $p$  that its aim is fully achieved only if one comes to know that  $p$  or to know that not- $p$  and, further, comes to know how one knows, either way. In the absence of the latter one is in no position to take the inquiry to be successfully completed or to vouch for the truth of the matter in hand. An upshot is that although knowledge matters because truth matters this should not be understood to mean that knowledge matters because true belief matters.

### I

Suppose that you are inquiring into whether something is so. Your aim is to find out whether it is so. Since finding out is nothing less than coming to know, what you aim for is knowledge.<sup>1</sup> It is obviously compatible with this that you aim at the truth, but, I shall argue, it is important that aiming at the truth just is aiming at knowledge. For the aim is to grasp the truth, and knowledge is the form that such grasping takes if the aim is achieved.

(Henceforth when I speak simply of inquiry I shall be referring only to inquiry into whether something is so. Likewise, my talk of inquirers is about those pursuing inquiry of this form. I do not suggest that it is the only form that inquiry can take.<sup>2</sup>)

Inquirers sometimes have to settle for less than knowledge due to limitations of time and other resources, or paucity of evidence that is available or likely to become so. If they know in advance that

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not universally accepted. Stephen Grimm (2009, p. 245) equates finding out the truth with believing the truth. Absent theoretical pressures discussed in this article I doubt that this would look like a plausible equation. Finding out that  $p$  has the same force as discovering that  $p$ . One finds out that  $p$  only if the truth that  $p$  is disclosed to one. It is not disclosed to one in Gettier situations (Gettier 1963) because in those situations one lacks the kind of cognitive purchase on the thing believed that one has when the truth is disclosed to one.

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct discussion of the forms inquiry can take, see Hookway (1990, pp. 151–4).

their inquiry will be thus limited can we say that they are aiming at knowledge? The claim I am pressing is only that *if* the inquiry is genuinely into whether such-and-such is so then the aim is find out and thus come to know the right answer. We need to distinguish between projects and aspirations. Projects aim to answer specific questions. If they are well designed and seriously pursued then there will be a realistic prospect of doing so. Projects can be motivated by aspirations to answer certain overarching questions, though they are directed only at finding answers to intermediate questions in the hope that they may be steps on the way to answering those overarching questions. The intermediate projects aim at knowledge, albeit knowledge that falls short of satisfying the aspiration.

In the face of reflections on limitations we should not lose sight of the fact that in the various routine inquiries of everyday life many things are found out. I find out by taste that there is insufficient salt in the pasta or that the coffee is too weak. I find out by looking that it is raining, or that most of the seed on the bird table has gone, or that crocuses are beginning to appear. In these cases perceiving that something is so establishes that it is so. Testimony can often settle that something is so. It can be that when a colleague phones you to say that the visiting speaker has arrived you have thereby learned—come to know—that she has arrived. (Imagine, after taking the call, saying to someone only that there is evidence that supports rather strongly the claim that the speaker has arrived.) As I conceive cases like this, your being told that something is so does more than merely give some support for the truth of the thing told; it clinches the matter in a sense that entails that this thing would have been told to you only if it were true. That is part of the explanation for how it is knowledge that you gain from the testimony. There is work for theorists to explain how a recipient of testimony can be in a position to treat an act of telling as clinching that the thing told is true, but as I approach the epistemology of testimony there being such acts of telling is a datum to be accommodated and understood rather than a problematic hypothesis.<sup>3</sup>

Taken in one way there is no puzzle about why it should be that inquiry aims at knowledge, since that is what inquiry is all about. Even so, philosophical tradition urges us to consider why it should

---

<sup>3</sup> I work towards an explanation in Millar (2010a, 2010b). There is a strand in epistemological tradition that links knowledge to having evidence that does more than merely lend strong support. See Dretske (1971), McDowell (1982) and Travis (2005).

be that *knowledge* is the goal of inquiry, rather than some state falling short of knowledge but implicating true belief. Granted that inquiry aims at the truth, what is so good about grasping the truth in the way one does when one knows? That is a question to which I seek a plausible answer. I have deliberately avoided posing the question to be addressed in a way that presupposes that aiming at truth should be conceived as aiming at true belief. Part of what I shall argue (in §III) is that this is the wrong way to think of the matter.

## II

Through his representation of Socrates in *Meno*, Plato provides a way of articulating the problem. If you know which is the road to Larissa you will be a good guide to anyone wishing to take that road, but Socrates poses this question: ‘If a man judges correctly which is the road, though he has never been there and doesn’t know it, will he not also guide others aright?’ (*Meno* 97b; trans. Guthrie 1956). It seems to be agreed between Socrates and Meno that this question calls for an affirmative answer. Why then is knowledge to be prized above correct (true) opinion?

One might take the message of this stretch of conversation to be that from a practical point of view knowledge and true belief are on a par.<sup>4</sup> However, as the discussion proceeds it becomes clear that only a more limited conclusion is reached—that the man who does not know will be just as good a guide as one who knows *so long as he retains the correct opinion* (*Meno* 97b–c). He might for all that not be as good a guide. We want a good guide not only to be right but also to be steadfast. This man’s correct opinion might too easily be dislodged by his own reflections, or promptings by others. As Socrates comments,

True opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place; but they will not stay long. They run away from a man’s mind so that they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason. ... Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. (*Meno* 97e–98a)

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Kvanvig (2003, p. x) claims that ‘Socrates defends the view that true belief works just as well for practical purposes as does knowledge’. Compare Greco (2009, pp. 313–14).

Socrates would have done better to say that true opinions *might not* stay long, since even if they are mere true beliefs it is possible that they should remain in place for want of anything to disturb them. Whether or not they do depends on various contingencies. The point that matters is that mere true beliefs are susceptible to being undermined because our own reflections and our social interactions might easily throw up challenges to them, or doubts concerning them. Coming to think we have no reason to think some belief true is liable to undermine it or lessen the firmness with which we hold it.<sup>5</sup> Suppose that I am the man on the road to Larissa and believe that I am on that road. As I go along the road I might start to wonder why I am so confident that I am on the right road. Perhaps I have no idea why I think that it is the right road. This would be unusual but not impossible. Or perhaps I was told that it is the right road by what seemed like a reliable informant and now someone has persuasively cast doubt on that informant's reliability. In those situations I do not know what to think. I could persist along the road and hope to arrive at Larissa, or I could make further inquiries. But as things are I don't know that this is the right road and I now know that I don't know. If I am rational, I will not even believe that it is, since I am aware that I lack any good reason to do so. Contrast this with a situation in which I clearly remember taking this road to Larissa last year. If in this situation the question were to arise as to why I take it to be the right road I could readily answer that I went to Larissa by this very road last year. The fact that I did so, which I have retained in memory, gives me a reason to believe that it is the right road. By the same token it gives me reason to be circumspect about any putative counter-evidence that might come to my attention. Indeed, clearly remembering that I took this very road before, it should and probably would take a lot to persuade me otherwise.

If we interpret Plato's metaphor of tethering in terms of having a relatively stable grasp of the truth, then Socrates' response seems to be heading in the right direction.<sup>6</sup> We should beware of thinking that highlighting the importance of stability commits us to explaining why knowledge matters solely in terms of its utility, whether

---

<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny that when beliefs have some satisfying psychological effect they might be hard to dislodge even if there is no strong reason to think them true.

<sup>6</sup> For a similar, sympathetic reaction to Socrates' response, see Williamson (2000, pp. 78–9).

practical or theoretical.<sup>7</sup> Stability of belief *is* clearly useful: if beliefs are to be useful they need to be available to be exploited when the need arises; they cannot be exploited if they have slipped away. But this is only a part of the story. I shall argue that knowledge matters because it is internal to a concern for the truth that it is not fully satisfied by anything less than knowledge. So it is not just useful to have knowledge. If we are concerned as to whether or not this or that is so, *for whatever reason*, it is good to have knowledge on the matter in question just because it is good to have the truth on that matter, which is not the same as to say that it is good to have knowledge on the matter in question just because it is good to have a true belief as to the matter. (See, further, §III.) The following considerations are pertinent.

(i) Those concerned as to whether something is so naturally want, and have good reason to want, more than a mere fleeting grasp of the truth of the matter; having reached the truth they want a secure grasp of it for at least so long as their concern lasts. That is simply because if their true belief slips away then their concern is no longer satisfied. Edward Craig suggests that stabilization of true beliefs is not always important since ‘many beliefs are required for the guidance of single, “one-off” actions under circumstances which will not recur’ (Craig 1990, p. 7). This is surely right, but the claim to defend should be only that stability of belief matters *so long as the truth of the matter in hand matters*. Wondering whether there is cheese in the fridge that can be offered to friends this evening, I look and see that there is plenty. In the circumstances nobody is going to alter that state of affairs before the cheese is to be served. So, given the point of my inquiry, it matters that, until this evening when I serve the cheese, I should retain my belief that there is enough in the fridge, and not have to check repeatedly to see whether there is. Beyond this evening it might well not matter whether there was cheese in the fridge in the period leading up to the evening, and so it might not matter whether I recall whether there was. The importance of stability is not impugned by the fact that many true beliefs will not need to be exploited after a certain point that might not be far off. Our concern as to the truth rightly aspires to a grasp of the truth that is as stable as the concern requires. Though the example I have just given is one in

---

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Pritchard (2010, ch. 1, §2) takes Plato’s response to the problem of why knowledge is to be prized above mere true belief to be in terms of the practical value of knowledge.

which the concern for the truth is motivated by practical considerations, this motivation is not essential to the main point, which is that a concern as to whether something is so, for whatever reason, is satisfied only by a stable enough grasp of the truth.

(ii) Those concerned as to whether something is so have good reason to want to be able to tell whether their inquiry into the matter has been successful. An inquiry is a task and agents who intend to carry out a task need to be able to tell when it has been completed. When the task is to grasp the truth as to whether or not something is so, inquirers need to know that they have done that. How are they to do that if not by telling that they know the truth? The reflective element here is crucial—not just knowing but knowing that we know.<sup>8</sup> Anything less than knowing the truth will not enable us to tell that we have grasped the truth—that we know it. Paradigm cases are provided by perceptual knowledge. Are my keys on the telephone table, where I regularly, but not invariably, keep them while at home? I look at the table and see, and thereby know, that they are. Not only do I recognize my keys as my keys, I recognize my keys as *my keys seen by me*. So with seeing that they are there comes knowing that I see that they are there.<sup>9</sup> The significance of reflective knowledge is that my inquiry does not merely cease with the fixation of a belief as to the location of the keys. It ceases because I know that the matter is settled—the truth grasped. By contrast, with respect to a mere true belief, by definition, I have no reason to think it true and it comes with nothing else that makes sense of how the matter in hand can be settled. The same applies to a mere justified true belief, as that is, to my mind rather oddly, conceived in the framework of mainstream epistemology. Even if I knew that I had, in the operative sense, a justified belief that something is so this would not give me a basis for taking it to be settled that it is so since, for all I know, I might be in a Gettier situation—one in which I do not know but have a true belief that is, in the relevant sense,

---

<sup>8</sup> Donald Davidson has written as follows: ‘We know many things, and will learn more; what we will never know for certain is which of the things we believe are true. Since it is neither visible as a target, nor recognizable when achieved, there is no point in calling truth a goal’ (Davidson 2005, p. 6). I can see no reason to deny that I can know for certain that I know where my keys are.

<sup>9</sup> Epistemology needs an account of how this can be so. I present such an account in Millar (2010b). It is as a component in a broader account of perceptual knowledge that gives a crucial role to recognitional abilities. I have previously invoked such abilities in Millar (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009b).

justified. If I am in such a situation I might be able to tell that my belief is justified in the operative sense, but that would fall well short of settling it that what I believe is true. (For more on this sense of ‘justified’, see §III below.) Plausibly then, it is not just knowledge on the matter in hand that I am after; it is knowledge accompanied by knowledge that I know—reflective knowledge by which I not only cease inquiry but know it to have been successfully completed because I have found out what I wanted to find out. It is not a routine task to extend such considerations beyond the scope of perceptual knowledge. This is something that merits close consideration.<sup>10</sup> Among other things we need to make sense of the difference, for someone with the right abilities, between, for instance, telling that deer have passed from tracks on a path and, in the absence of tracks, believing that deer will probably have passed because one knows they usually would have by now. The trained gamekeeper can establish from the presence of tracks that deer have passed and know that he has. He cannot do so on the basis of the deer’s customary routine. Similarly, there is a difference between knowing that a family member has arrived at her destination because she phones to tell you she has, and having some degree of confidence that she has because her means of travel were unlikely to have been delayed. The latter consideration does not settle the matter; the phone call might do so.

The upshot of (i) is that its relative stability contributes to explaining why knowledge matters, not just because stability is useful, but also because, without stability that matches the longevity of our concern for the truth, that concern is not satisfied, irrespective of whatever else grasping the truth enables one to do. The upshot of (ii) is that it is unsurprising that inquiry whether something is so aims at knowledge whether it is so because (a) being reflective agents, inquirers have reason to want to be able to tell whether their inquiry has been successfully completed, and (b) only gaining the knowledge sought enables them to know that they have grasped the truth of the matter.<sup>11</sup> It is not an implication of this view that necessarily, if you know then you know that you know. If you know that *p* but lack knowledge that you know that *p* then you will not be in a

<sup>10</sup> For steps in this direction, see Millar (2010b); for a shorter overview, see Millar (2011a).

<sup>11</sup> My emphasis on the importance, for an understanding of why knowledge matters, of reflective access to what enables us to know has affinities with Ward Jones’s influential 1997 article.

position to reap the inquiry-related benefits that can come from your knowing that *p*. It is part of the view that knowledge is no mere aspiration. We often have it and know that we have it, which is why we can so often responsibly terminate our inquiries and responsibly vouch for the truth of what we have found out. For all that, we might have less of it than some epistemologist's think. Often the best that we can hope to achieve are theories more or less well supported by evidence, but not established as true.

It might be suggested that there are ways in which a mere true belief that something is so could be stable, and satisfy our concern for the truth, without being tied in the way suggested to reflective knowledge. Perhaps it is possible to manipulate a person's psychology so that he or she comes to believe something and will continue to believe it no matter what. If the belief were true then such a person would have a belief as stable as any that is tied to knowledge; it would be tethered but not through knowledge. My response is implicit in what has already been said. The issue is why grasping the truth, by way of satisfying a concern to know something, would ideally take the form of knowledge, and indeed reflective knowledge. The worry about non-rational fixation can be addressed simply by reiterating the observation already made (under (ii)) to the effect that inquirers aim at more than just the fixation of belief; they aim to be able to tell that their inquiry has been successfully completed—the truth grasped. A non-rational fixation is not the kind of thing from which one can tell that an inquiry has been successfully completed.

The message so far, then, is that knowledge matters for inquirers because only knowledge satisfies their concern for truth. This is not to deny that due to some contingency an individual's knowledge of something might be fleeting. Jonathan Kvanvig says that 'knowledge, no less than true beliefs, can be lost' (Kvanvig 2003, p. 13). It is true that knowledge can be lost. Among other things it can be lost through forgetting. But when comparing knowing something with the corresponding merely true belief we should take these conditions to be on a par with respect to the degree to which they are available for exploitation and resistant to erosion through forgetting. Screening out such factors it seems to me to remain plausible that, barring odd contingencies, reflective agents who know that they know whether something is so and who retain a concern as to the truth of the matter, are better placed to hold on to the truth in



question than one who has the counterpart mere true belief. It is not an implication of the account that necessarily, every case of knowing something is more stable than would be the corresponding state of mere true belief.<sup>12</sup>

### III

It seems entirely natural to take knowledge be the goal of inquiry. Why then has this idea not figured more prominently in epistemology? One reason is that it has been assumed that truth is the goal of inquiry and that we can make sense of that in terms of the idea that *true belief* is the goal of inquiry, leaving open how knowledge fits into the picture. I shall return to this presently. Another reason is that viewing knowledge as the goal of inquiry has been thought to be theoretically unhelpful. Here is Marian David:

Invocation of the truth-goal serves primarily a theoretical need, a need that arises from the overall structure of epistemology. The knowledge-goal would not serve this need. As far as epistemology is concerned, the knowledge-goal is theoretically impotent. (David 2001, p. 153)

The background idea is here is that the theory of knowledge should provide an account of what knowledge is in terms of true belief and justified belief and, moreover, can best do so by bringing out the relation between true belief and justified belief. The theoretical need that David takes the truth-goal to serve is that of enabling us to shed light on ‘a connection between the concept of justification and the concept of true belief, tying together the different ingredients of knowledge’ (David 2001, p. 154). The connection is, roughly, that beliefs are evaluated with respect to justification because they are to be evaluated ‘relative to the standard, or goal, of believing truth and avoiding error’ (David 2001, p. 154). Against this background David says that the knowledge-goal ‘does not fit into this picture in

---

<sup>12</sup> Kvanvig (2003, pp. 15–18) also claims that knowledge can be lost in cases in which there is an unknown defeater that undermines subjects’ knowledge but does not touch the truth of the corresponding beliefs. He describes a case in which someone is supposed to lose mathematical knowledge since, unknown to him, a famous mathematician incorrectly testifies that the proposition in question is false. It is open to question whether this is a case in which knowledge is lost. But, even if knowledge can be lost in this way, instances are surely rare. Retaining knowledge, as much as gaining it, depends on the environment being such that certain circumstances do not obtain or obtain only very rarely.

any helpful manner' because it does not 'provide an independent anchor for understanding epistemic concepts' (David 2001, p. 154). The problem, more specifically, is that 'any attempt to understand justification relative to the knowledge-goal would invert the explanatory direction and would make the whole approach circular and entirely unilluminating' (David 2001, p. 154). By David's lights, and those of mainstream epistemology, since knowledge is to be explained in terms of justification it would be circular to explain justification in terms of knowledge.

Contrasted with David's view is a view that I favour and take to be more solidly supported. Timothy Williamson articulates it when he says that 'justification is primarily a status which knowledge can confer on beliefs that look good in its light' (Williamson 2000, p. 9). Though this is liable to seem bizarre from a perspective on which it is assumed that knowledge is to be explained in terms of justification it is nonetheless a very natural, commonsense view. What looks like a justification for thinking that something is so, given what we take to be the relevant facts, collapses if we find that our conclusion depends essentially on some falsehood that we had taken for a fact.<sup>13</sup> It fails to establish the conclusion if it is shown to depend on a putative fact that is challenged and we lack adequate reason to think that we know it for a fact. In this latter situation it is not settled what are the facts, and so what had been taken to be the facts do not provide a sound basis for the conclusion in question. When it

---

<sup>13</sup> Peter Klein (2008) thinks that we can acquire knowledge relying essentially on false assumptions. A case in point, he thinks, is coming to know you have an appointment on Monday on the basis of a false assumption that your secretary told you on Friday that you have such an appointment. The thing is that your secretary did tell you that you had an appointment on Monday but she did not do so on Friday. It seems to me that this is either not a case of gaining knowledge or it is a case of gaining knowledge but not in a way that relies essentially on a false assumption. Let's suppose that you believe that your secretary told you that you have an appointment on Monday, this being a straightforward entailment of something that *ex hypothesi* you believe. If you would still have believed this on learning that she did not tell you on Friday, then your belief that you have an appointment on Monday is not essentially based on the false assumption that the secretary told you on Friday that you have this appointment. It's your recalling her telling you that is doing both the causal and justificatory work. In that case it could be that you gain knowledge from what you were told. Klein points out that there is no guarantee that if you gave up the belief that the secretary told you on Friday you would still believe that she told you. Suppose that you would not. If that were so I see no reason to suppose that you gained knowledge that you have the appointment on Monday. You have a basis adequate for knowledge only if you are moved by the assumption that the secretary told you that you had this appointment. But if your only reason for holding this assumption were bound up with believing falsely that she told you on Friday then you had no good reason to believe that she told you at all and so no good reason to believe that you have an appointment on Monday.

is so clear that anything less than known facts do not provide a solid ground for accepting conclusions, why should epistemologists have worked with a conception of justification that represents justification as coming from less than known facts? One factor has undoubtedly been the attractiveness of providing an account of knowledge in terms of justified belief and other conditions—an account that would be reductive in that the *explanans* would not implicate the concept of knowledge. Added to this is the idea, prompted by Gettier cases, that we can be justified in believing things on the basis of false assumptions or on the basis of merely seeming to see that something is so. The traditional reductive-analytical project strikes me as being hopeless, but there is *something* right about the idea that the subject in Gettier cases has, in some sense, a justified belief. A belief can be, let us say, reasonable in a sense that implies that in the circumstances it is understandably and blamelessly held even though based on false assumptions or on seeming to see that something is so. But there is a difference between being justified in the sense of being reasonable and being well grounded and in that stronger sense justified. Beliefs based on false assumptions or seemings to see are, in a perfectly natural sense, not well grounded even if they are reasonable. Moreover, the natural order of explanation is from well-groundedness to reasonableness: a belief is reasonable if the subject's situation is indiscriminable from one in which he or she has a well-grounded belief.

David thinks that the knowledge-goal is theoretically impotent but the considerations that are supposed to support this view lack force if knowledge is explanatorily prior to justified belief.

The deep root of the problem for David, and mainstream epistemology generally, lies in thinking that belief is an ingredient of knowledge and, in keeping with this, supposing that *belief* is the basic category in terms of which the relation to the truth that inquiry seeks should be characterized. For with that as part of the picture it seems natural to explicate knowledge in terms of conditions on belief. We can put pressure on the view by thinking again of perceptual knowledge.

I look at the bird table and see a squirrel on it. Recognizing it to be a squirrel, I see that, and thereby know that, it is a squirrel. That I know that it is a squirrel is explained by my seeing that it is. That I see that it is a squirrel is explained by my exercising a perceptual-recognitional ability that amounts to being in command of a way of

telling (thus knowing) of certain things that they are squirrels from the way they look. We have here an entirely natural way of accounting not only for how I acquire this knowledge but also for what makes it knowledge. I acquire the knowledge via the exercise of the recognitional ability. Exercising this ability is nothing less than coming to know of something that it is a squirrel.<sup>14</sup> What makes the condition I come to be in knowledge is that it comes about through the exercise of the ability. It is true that in acquiring the knowledge I do concerning the thing at which I am looking I acquire a belief—the belief that *that* is a squirrel. Plausibly, that is because necessarily if you know that something is so you have what it takes to count as believing that it is so. But accepting that does not commit us to regarding the belief as an ingredient of the knowledge and something in terms of which knowledge must be explained. For belief might yet be a determinable of which there are there many determinate modes, including knowledge. Arguably it is. The claim that someone believes that *p* underdetermines the psychological state that the person is in, since a range of states that differ in character can count as beliefs that *p*. This is obvious from the fact that two people might count as believing that *p* yet differ in that one believes more firmly than the other. The present proposal is that knowing that *p* is simply a way in which one can believe that *p*. In reflective agents this mode of believing has potential to impact on thought and action that lesser states implicating true belief lack. For instance, when I know that my keys are on the table in virtue of seeing that they are, I acquire a reason to believe that they are, constituted by the fact that I see that they are. That reason is available to me because when I see the keys I not only recognize them to be my keys, I recognize them to be seen by me.<sup>15</sup> It is from their visual appearance and that of their surroundings that, thanks to being equipped with the requisite recogni-

---

<sup>14</sup> The notion of exercising a recognitional ability is a success notion just like that of exercising the ability to ride a bicycle. Our fallibility consists in our not always exercising such abilities when we aspire to, not in our sometimes exercising them in gaining something less than knowledge or in gaining false beliefs. There is a temptation to say that all abilities are fallible in a sense that entails that they are sometimes successfully exercised and sometimes not. This is encouraged by cases like the ability to throw a dart into the 25 ring. In Millar (2009b) I argue that these are success rate abilities. In the sense in which recognitional abilities are abilities, success rate abilities are abilities to achieve a success rate, within some range, over a series of trials. They are exercised if and only if one does just that. The fact that some attempts fail to hit within the 25 ring does not undermine the idea that the notion of exercising such an ability is a success notion.

<sup>15</sup> I explore this more fully in Millar (2011b).

tional ability, I tell that I see that they are on the table. The upshot is that when I know that the keys are on the table in virtue of seeing that they are, the state of seeing, and in that way knowing, that they are on the table can impact on my thinking in a way that a merely true belief or a reasonable true belief cannot, since *it* can, and these other states cannot, supply me with a reason to believe that my keys are on the table—a reason that I am able to treat as a reason so to believe.

From this perspective it looks wrong to assume without further ado that the truth-goal should be conceived as true belief merely as such, rather than as some more specific mode of true belief. It is undoubtedly the case that if knowledge whether something is so matters it is because the truth as to whether it is so matters, but that is far short of establishing that knowledge matters because true *belief* merely as such matters. It is not in dispute that if our search for the truth on some matter is successful we shall have a true belief on it, but it is wildly implausible to suppose that what we are after, or should be after, if concerned as to the truth is a true belief conceived merely as such. True belief is a state that can obtain in virtue of satisfying minimal conditions for believing a truth. It can be poorly grounded and unreasonable, fleeting and unstable. It can fail to be bound up with a condition that enables us to know that our inquiry has been successfully completed.

In the light of the foregoing we can see how the so-called swamping problem (Kvanvig (2003, 2009, 2010)) does not arise for the theoretical approach I am defending. I outline a strand of the problem that specifically concerns the value of knowledge of over true belief.

The starting point is a rather plausible claim about the value of knowledge—that if knowledge as to whether or not something is so is valuable to an inquirer into whether or not it is so, this is solely because gaining the truth as to whether it is so is valuable to that inquirer. But gaining the truth in question consists in acquiring a true belief. From this it follows that knowledge whether something is so can be valuable to an inquirer into whether it is so only because acquiring a true belief on the matter is valuable. (The value of the knowledge is parasitic on, or derivative from, the value of the true belief.) From the latter it follows that even if a true belief on a matter has an additional property like being formed by a reliable process, or being justi-

fied, its possession of that property is irrelevant to (swamped by) the value of a true belief to an inquirer into the matter *once that true belief has been attained by the inquirer*.

The problem can be seen to arise only on the assumption that gaining the truth as to whether something is so just is acquiring a true belief as to whether it is so. This is an assumption that I have been concerned to displace. As inquirers into whether something is so, we of course reach for the truth as to whether it is so, but what we reach for is the grasp of the truth in which knowledge consists. For the truth to matter to us just is for knowledge of it to matter.

I should make clear that for Kvanvig the swamping problem is explicitly directed at accounts of the value of knowledge available under epistemological theories that represent knowledge as true belief plus the satisfaction of further conditions.<sup>16</sup> I do not consider here how telling the problem is against such theories and their accompanying accounts of the value of knowledge, but simply record that it seems to me that once it is conceded that the value of knowledge has to be explained solely in terms of the value of mere true belief then the game is up.

Kvanvig also thinks that the swamping problem ‘is, at its core, a problem about the special and unique value of knowledge over that of its parts, rather than a problem concerning the value of knowledge itself’ (Kvanvig 2010, p. 93). More fully spelled out, the problem is to be understood as concerning ‘a special truth-related, *prima facie* value that [knowledge] possesses necessarily if at all’ (Kvanvig 2010, p. 94). I have no clear sense of what such a special value might be, but say a little more about the kind of value I take knowledge to have in the next section.

#### IV

The issue has been why knowledge whether or not something is so, as opposed to some lesser state implicating true belief, matters to an inquirer into whether or not this thing is so. The answer proposed is that only knowledge satisfies the inquirer’s concern for the truth.

---

<sup>16</sup> Kvanvig (2003, pp. xiii, 139) represents those theories as attempting to explain the value of knowledge in terms of the value of its parts or constituents.

The issue is in effect about the value of knowledge about some particular subject matter *for an inquirer into that subject matter*.

The value here is agent-relative in Thomas Nagel's sense. In this sense accepting 'that some kind of thing has agent-relative value commits us only to believing that someone has reason to want and pursue it if it is related to him in the right kind of way' (Nagel 1986, p. 154). Our focus has been on the reason that *inquirers into whether or not something is so* have to seek knowledge whether or not it is so. If possessed, the knowledge is related to the inquirer in this way: its attainment can satisfy the agent's concern for the truth on the matter in question in a way that nothing else can. That confers agent-relative value upon it. It does not follow that the knowledge in question has agent-neutral value such that anyone has reason to attain it. Nor even does it follow that the agent ought to acquire the knowledge, if 'ought' is understood to express the upshot of deliberation as to what to do (cf. Williams 1981). For the reason in question is akin to the reason that someone who intends to do something has to take the means necessary. This kind of reason confers a point on, and in that way makes sense of, taking the necessary means, but having such a reason does not entail that one ought in the deliberative sense to take the necessary means.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps one ought instead to abandon the intention. Similarly, from the claim that attaining knowledge that something is so would have agent-relative value for me it does not follow that I ought to acquire it.

The account admits of a natural extension to those who are landed with knowledge without looking for it. The knowledge will be of agent-relative value to them so long as they have a concern as to the truth of the matter. One reason why knowledge can be short-lived is simply that the subject lacks, or comes to lack, a concern on the matter in question.

From this perspective it remains an open question whether there might be knowledge that has agent-neutral value such that each of us has reason to gain or retain it. If there is such knowledge it will matter because of its content, not simply because it is knowledge.

There are discussions of truth as an epistemic goal or epistemic good that might convey the impression that grasp of the truth, irrespective of its content, has agent-neutral value. If this were so then there would be a sense in which knowledge, irrespective of its con-

---

<sup>17</sup> I discuss such reasons in Millar (2004, ch. 2; 2009a).

tent, also has agent-neutral value. Michael Lynch (2004, pp. 15–19), for instance, takes it to be a truism that truth is worth caring about for its own sake.<sup>18</sup> To motivate this he cites examples of wanting to know the truth on some specific matter irrespective of any practical value that this might have. Yet in summing up his view Lynch does not speak of caring about whether this or that specific thing is true, but simply about caring about truth. Indeed, he takes it to be a *prima facie* cognitive or epistemic good that we should believe all and only truths (Lynch 2004, pp. 46–51). ('*Prima facie*' in this context means *can be outweighed by other goods*.) This suggests that the good in question is agent-neutral, for it seems to imply that we have *some* reason to pursue all truths irrespective of their content and how they relate to us, albeit that this reason can be outweighed. In a later work Lynch modifies the claim so as to avoid the obvious objection that it represents the good of true belief as an unattainable goal. It becomes the claim that '[i]t is *prima facie* good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true' (Lynch 2009, p. 226). I cannot find a way of interpreting this so that it looks plausible. Whether the good in question is agent-relative or agent-neutral there is a problem of how to make sense of what is so good about having true beliefs specifically about propositions one might consider.

We can avoid these problems while doing justice to the idea that in some sense true belief is good belief. For it seems plausible that *if* you were to have a belief as to whether or not *p* it would be a good thing that it should be the belief that *p* if and only if *p*, and the belief that not-*p* if and only if not-*p*. If this is right then agents who satisfy a certain condition—that of having or aspiring to have a belief as to whether or not *p*—have a reason to want any belief that they have or acquire as to whether *p* to be true. The reason here is agent-relative—it is a reason for agents who satisfy the condition of having or aspiring to have a belief as to whether or not *p*. There is no suggestion here that agents should be pursuing the truth on any particular matter.

My scepticism about the agent-neutral value of true belief, irrespective of its content, is obviously compatible with the idea that there might be all sorts of reasons—prudential, moral and otherwise—why agents should find out whether this or that is so. It is

---

<sup>18</sup> For scepticism about such a claim, see Heal (1987–8, especially pp. 105–8).



also compatible with the view that there are some truths that all of us, perhaps just in virtue of being human, should grasp. The proposed view does not touch on these matters. It is one way of trying to capture the idea that belief in some metaphorical sense aims at truth.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of the discussion in this essay should we say that belief aims at knowledge? Perhaps not. Claims about the aim of belief should be psychologically realistic. It seems far less clear that necessarily belief is sensitive to facts and considerations bearing on whether what is believed is known than that necessarily belief is sensitive to facts and considerations bearing on whether what is believed is true. In any case I cannot pursue the matter here.<sup>20</sup>

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Stirling*  
*Stirling FK9 4LA*  
*Scotland*  
 UK  
*alan.millar@stir.ac.uk*

#### REFERENCES

- Craig, Edward 1990: *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- David, Marian 2001: 'Truth as the Epistemic Goal'. In Matthias Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, pp. 151–69. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald 2005: 'Truth Rehabilitated'. In his *Truth, Language, and History*, pp. 3–17. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dretske, Fred 1971: 'Conclusive Reasons'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 49, pp. 1–22.
- Gettier, Edmund L. 1963: 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'. *Analysis*, 23, pp. 121–3.
- Greco, John 2009: 'The Value Problem'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2009, pp. 313–21.

<sup>19</sup> I discuss this idea more fully in Millar (2009a).

<sup>20</sup> This article arises from work done in connection with a project on the value of knowledge funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Duncan Pritchard and Adrian Haddock were co-participants in the project, and I have benefited from many discussions with them. I am especially grateful to Adrian for detailed comments on this paper that led to improvements.

- Grimm, Stephen R. 2009: 'Epistemic Normativity'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2009, pp. 243–64.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. (trans.) 1956: *Plato: Protagoras and Meno*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Haddock, Adrian, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (eds.) 2009: *Epistemic Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (eds.) 2010: *Social Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heal, Jane 1987–8: 'The Disinterested Search for Truth'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 88, pp. 97–108.
- Hookway, Christopher 1990: *Scepticism*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, Ward E. 1997: 'Why Do We Value Knowledge?'. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34, pp. 423–39.
- Klein, Peter D. 2008: 'Useful False Beliefs'. In Quentin Smith (ed.) *Epistemology: New Essays*, pp. 25–61. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kvanvig, Jonathan L. 2003: *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2009: 'Precis of *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2009, pp. 309–12.
- 2010: 'The Swamping Problem Redux: Pith and Gist'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2010, pp. 89–111.
- Lynch, Michael P. 2004: *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 2009: 'The Values of Truth and the Truth of Values'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2009, pp. 226–42.
- McDowell, John 1982: 'Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge'. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68, pp. 455–79. Reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, pp. 369–94. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Millar, Alan 2004: *Understanding People: Normativity and Rationalizing Explanation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 2007: 'What the Disjunctivist is Right About'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74, pp. 176–98.
- 2008a: 'Perceptual-Recognitional Abilities and Perceptual Knowledge'. In Adrian Haddock and Fiona Macpherson (eds.), *Disjunctivism: Perception, Action, Knowledge*, pp. 330–47. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 2008b: 'Disjunctivism and Skepticism'. In John Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, pp. 581–604. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2009a: 'How Reasons for Action Differ from Reasons for Belief'. In Simon Robertson (ed.), *Spheres of Reason: New Essays in the Philosophy of Normativity*, pp. 140–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2009b: 'What Is It That Cognitive Abilities Are Abilities to Do?'. *Acta Analytica*, 24, pp. 223–36.

- 2010a: 'Knowing From Being Told'. In Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2010, pp. 175–93.
- 2010b: 'Knowledge and Recognition'. Part II of Pritchard, Millar and Haddock 2010.
- 2011a: 'Knowledge and Reasons for Belief'. In Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (eds.), *Reasons for Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2011b: 'How Visual Perception Yields Reasons for Belief'. *Philosophical Issues*, 21: *The Epistemology of Perception*.
- Nagel, Thomas 1986: *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pritchard, Duncan 2010: 'Knowledge and Understanding'. Part I of Pritchard, Millar and Haddock 2010.
- Alan Millar, and Adrian Haddock 2010: *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Travis, Charles 2005: 'A Sense of Occasion'. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 55, pp. 286–314.
- Williams, Bernard 1981: 'Ought and Moral Obligation'. In his *Moral Luck*, pp. 114–23. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, Timothy 2000: *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.