Inverting the Value Problem
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Many epistemologists have endorsed the idea that “knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief” and that any plausible analysis of knowledge must answer to this fact. More precisely they endorse the idea that:

Any plausible analysis of knowledge must be such that if a belief satisfies the full range of its conditions, this belief must have value over and above the value it would have if it had merely satisfied the true belief condition.

The fact that some popular accounts of knowledge seem incapable of satisfying this constraint has given rise to the so-called “value problem” in epistemology.

I have argued elsewhere that the value problem is unmotivated on grounds concerning the intuition that is supposed to get the problem up and running. Here I want to come at the problem from a (mostly) different angle. I shall argue that in fact knowledge is not always more valuable than mere true belief. If I am right, a couple of interesting conclusions follow: (1) the constraint on an analysis of knowledge noted above is not a genuine constraint and thus the value problem is not a genuine problem; and (2) any analysis of knowledge which “solves” or “overcomes” the value problem encounters a new and arguably more formidable problem, which I shall refer to the “inverse value problem.” In the course of the discussion, special attention will be paid to so-called “credit” or “achievement” theories of knowledge, since these theories have arisen partially in response to the traditional value problem and because a focused examination of them will add to the strength of my argument.

I. Preliminaries

1. When thinking about whether knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief, we must restrict our attention to cognitive or epistemic value. That is, our question should be: from an epistemic or cognitive or intellectual standpoint, is it the case that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief?

2. Furthermore, we should approach the issue from a ceteris paribus, or “other things being equal,” perspective. That is, we should ask: from an epistemic or cognitive standpoint, is it the case that, other things being equal, knowledge is always epistemically or cognitively better than mere true belief? Alternatively: is every item of knowledge, considered in its own right, or apart from any other considerations, epistemically or cognitively better than the corresponding item of mere true belief?

3. It might be wondered what exactly is meant by “mere true belief” or even by “knowledge.” I would like to set these issues aside, at least for the time being. I suggest
that we do our best to limit ourselves to fairly generic ways of thinking about knowledge and that we think of “mere true beliefs” simply as true beliefs that falls short of knowledge in some way or other (without worrying about which way or ways this might include).

4. This leads to a related issue. The context of our inquiry is that of trying to figure out whether certain broadly compelling ways of thinking about knowledge have implications for an adequate analysis of knowledge. Our discussion, then, is in some sense prior to any robustly theoretical considerations about knowledge. Accordingly, we should do what we can to settle the issue absent appeals to any particular theoretical account of knowledge. We will return to this point below.

5. Finally, note that to mount a successful argument against the claim that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief, one need only demonstrate that this claim fails to hold relative to a single case. This illustrates the relative strength or extremity of the view I am critiquing and the relative weakness or modesty of the view I am defending.

II. The Case Against the Value Claim

At issue is the following claim concerning the value of knowledge:

\[(VK) \text{ For any proposition P, knowledge of P is epistemically or cognitively more valuable, other things being equal, than mere true belief about P.}\]

I shall consider four possible lines of objection to (VK).

1. An intuitive argument against (VK)

Consider your favorite example of a “trivial” subject matter, or subject matter about which you have no interest or curiosity whatsoever (e.g. the number of blades of grass on your neighbor’s lawn, irrelevant minutiae of the federal tax code, listings of the Hong Kong telephone book, etc.). Now ask yourself: from a (reasonably) theory neutral standpoint, is knowledge really epistemically more valuable than mere true belief relative to this subject matter? Would you consider yourself epistemically worse off if you were forced to “settle” for true belief about such things? Presumably not.

**Objection.** Our thinking about knowledge may be so theory-laden that we simply cannot perform the relevant thought experiment. Or it may be that while there are univocal, shared, and reasonably theory-neutral ways of thinking about knowledge that bear on this issue, they do not actually favor my conclusion (i.e. your pretheoretical intuitions may not agree with mine).

**Reply.** Fair enough. But an important caveat: the objector to (VK) must not be asked to shoulder the burden of proof here in an unreasonable way—e.g. in the way that an objector to
psychological egoism often is (“human actions are generally self-interested” → “surely all human actions are self-interested”).

2. The “worthless truths” argument against (VK)

In discussions about the epistemic “goal” or “good,” the point is often made that not all truth or truths or true beliefs are cognitively valuable: that we do not just want the truth simpliciter, but rather the truth about a certain limited range of subject matters—e.g. those that are somehow intrinsically important or those that we just happen to be curious about. At the top of the list of epistemically “worthless truths” are the sorts of trivial truths noted above.

Suppose, then, that there are some epistemically worthless truths. This amounts to the following claim:

(1) There are some facts such that having “mere true beliefs” about them is cognitively or epistemically worthless.

Those who accept (VK) will also accept this claim:

(2) There is no fact such that having knowledge of it is cognitively or epistemically worthless.

(1) and (2) may not be inconsistent, but their conjunction is at least a little bit puzzling. Truth is conceptually and normatively central to knowledge. But if so, then if a given true belief is epistemically worthless, why think (again, doing your best to limit yourself to theoretically neutral ways of thinking about knowledge) that the corresponding item of knowledge would be epistemically valuable? Even more to the point, why think this must be true in every case? When it comes to truths that are epistemically worthless, why think that, other things being equal, knowledge of these truths is always epistemically valuable?

First objection. “Well, if I must have beliefs about the relevant subject matters at all, then surely I would do better to ‘go all the way,’ as it were, and to acquire knowledge of these matters rather than ‘mere true beliefs’ or, for that matter, false beliefs.”

Reply. This objection threatens to beg the question. For it suggests that, in the relevant cases, there would be something “incomplete” or second-rate about having mere true beliefs rather than knowledge. But this, of course, is the very question at issue.

Second objection. While the conjunction of (1) and (2) may seem strange, it does not amount to a contradiction. And there are good theoretical explanations available of why, even where forming a mere true belief about a certain subject matter would be cognitively worthless, acquiring knowledge about this subject matter would be cognitively or epistemically superior.

Reply. We will return to this suggestion below when we consider a theoretically robust reply to the value problem.
3. The “cognitive resources” argument against (VK)

The present argument rests on a quasi-theoretical claim about knowledge, but it is one that is consistent with a very broad range of accounts of knowledge. The argument goes like this:

(1) Knowledge makes a greater draw on our cognitive capacity and resources than mere true belief.

(2) Certain subject matters are such that we should devote to them as little of our cognitive capacity and as few of our cognitive resources as possible.

(3) Therefore, certain subject matters are such that mere true belief about them is preferable to knowledge.

(4) Therefore, relative to certain subject matters, mere true belief is more valuable than knowledge.

Regarding (1): this premise is true on a wide range of theoretical accounts of knowledge, ranging from internalist/evidentialist accounts to reliabilist/credit accounts.

Regarding (2): this premise is intuitively plausible. And the point is not merely a “practical” one: it is not merely that if we “spend” our cognitive resources on inferior subject matters, we will then have fewer resources to devote to more worthy subject matters. For even if we had unlimited cognitive resources, certain subject matters are such that they would fail to merit an expenditure of these resources.

4. The “credit/achievement” argument against (VK)

I now abandon any attempt at theoretical neutrality and turn to address (VK) in connection with one recently very popular way of thinking about knowledge. In recent years, several epistemologists have endorsed the idea that knowledge is a matter (roughly) of reaching the truth or forming a true belief in a way that is “creditable” to the agent—that is, such that the agent’s reaching the truth is “attributable” to or “explainable” in terms of the agent’s intellectual skills or abilities. Put another way, the idea is that knowledge is an achievement: it is a matter of reaching the truth in a way that it is “creditable” to one’s intellectual “virtues.”

Interestingly, such accounts have been touted as being in an especially good position to “solve” the value problem, that is, to explain why knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief. The idea is that knowledge is essentially a credit-worthy state or achievement in a way that mere true belief is not; and since “credit-worthy states” and “achievements” are valuable things, it follows that knowledge necessarily has value over and above the value of mere true belief.

Now, it might be thought that the overall strength and plausibility of “credit/achievement” accounts of knowledge are sufficient to override the foregoing considerations against (VK). I
shall argue, to the contrary: (1) that such accounts, depending on how exactly we are to understand them, are either false or inconsistent with (VK); and (2) that a closer inspection of these accounts actually strengthens the case against (VK).

I do not (here) wish to take issue with the idea that knowledge is essentially a matter of reaching the truth in a way that is (in some sense) “attributable” to or “explainable” in terms of the intellectual skills and abilities of the knower. And I am entirely amenable to the idea that knowledge is often a cognitive “achievement” and that as such it has value that exceeds the value of mere true belief. Nonetheless, I think that “credit/achievement” accounts of knowledge run into trouble in connection with cases of trivial (and related) kinds of knowledge.

To come at the problem, let us consider some features of our more general or ordinary usage of concepts like credit and achievement. Specifically, for a subject S that arrives at a given end E via (in a way that is “attributable” to) her skills or abilities A, does S’s arriving at E via A always constitute an “achievement”? In particular, where E is worthless, is S’s arriving at E via A necessarily a genuine achievement? Does S necessarily get “credit” (in a normative sense) for arriving at E? It seems not.

The same goes where the end in question is truth or true belief. Again, consider your favorite case of epistemically worthless truth. If the true belief in question really is epistemically worthless, does it make sense to think of arriving at this belief via one’s intellectual skills or abilities as a genuine (normative) achievement? Does one really deserve “credit” (in a normative sense) for reaching this end? It seems not.

In fact, this reasoning can be taken a step further. Again, let’s begin by considering the matter from a more general or ordinary usage standpoint. Suppose E is positively disvaluable: that E is an evil or otherwise positively undesirable end. If S arrives at E via her skills or abilities A, does this amount to a (positive) “achievement”? Does S get “credit” for E? No. Rather, S will be blamed for E. And while his accomplishing E may amount to an “achievement” in some sense, it will not amount to positive achievement—any more than the terrorist’s successful execution of a bomb plot via his skills and abilities amounts to a positive achievement.

The question, then, is whether the end of true belief, considered in its own right, is ever cognitively or epistemically disvaluable (vs. merely “worthless” or “insignificant”). I think it is. Here again you should think in terms of examples that you find most compelling, but some relevant possibilities include: (1) many “celebrity” truths (e.g. what Britney Spears purchased or was wearing in her recent visit to McDonald’s or to a Santa Monica boutique); (2) truths about the foolish behavior of others (e.g. “On the evening news tonight, a story about a man who …”); (3) truths about the foolish beliefs of others (e.g. details of certain extremely irrational or logically perverse ways of thinking).

I submit that many truths in the above categories (and other categories besides) are cognitively (not merely morally or otherwise) disvaluable. Put subjectively, these are things about which, even from a purely cognitive or epistemic standpoint, I want not to have true beliefs (or any beliefs at all). I want not to devote any of my cognitive resources or capacity to these matters, and would feel the same even if these resources and capacity were unlimited. Put objectively, the
matters in question are not **worth** my cognitive capacity or resources. The suggestion, then, is that in cases of this sort, if a person reaches the truth via her intellectual skills and abilities, the result is not a (positive) cognitive “achievement” or something for which the person deserves “credit” (in any positive sense); indeed, it may be something for which the person deserves epistemic **blame**.

What, then, is the upshot of this argument against (VK)?

One implication is that if we think of knowledge as a matter of reaching the truth in a way that is “attributable” or “explainable” in terms of one’s epistemic virtues, then (surprisingly) we actually have reason to **deny** that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief (“surprisingly” because, again, such thinking is often taken to **support** the idea that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief).

But what are the implications for thinking of knowledge explicitly in terms of “credit” or “achievement”? If the suggestion is that knowledge is **always** or **essentially** an achievement or credit-worthy state (at least in any **positive** sense), then this view is apparently false. However, if the suggestion is that knowledge **tends** to be or **typically** is an achievement or credit-worthy state, then view in question may very well be correct. Thus I offer the following recommendation to “credit/achievement” theorists: make the conceptual basis of your accounts that of reaching the truth in a way that is “attributable” or “explainable” in terms of the knower’s skills and abilities. While the notions of “credit” or “achievement” may be useful metaphors for understanding knowledge on this model, don’t build these into the essential or defining conditions for knowledge.

**III. Conclusion**

Suppose, then, that we’ve encountered some good reasons for rejecting (VK). What follows?

Implications for the value problem. Recall that this problem is predicated on the idea that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief and that any plausible analysis of knowledge must “answer” to this fact—i.e. must be such that if a belief satisfies the full range of its conditions, this belief will have value over and above the value it would have had if it had only satisfied the true belief condition. We have seen that the idea in question is false and thus that the corresponding constraint and “problem” are unmotivated.

Implications for analyses of knowledge that “solve” the value problem. We have seen how accounts of knowledge which are thought to “solve” the value problem can, with very little in the way of theoretical amendment, be finessed such that (to their advantage) they no longer solve it. However, for accounts that really **do** solve the value problem (i.e. for any analysis that really is such that a belief that satisfies the full range of its conditions necessarily has value over and above the value it would have if it had only satisfied the true belief condition), we must conclude that all such accounts are false. Call this the “**inverse** value problem.” Again, the idea is that to the extent that an analysis of knowledge “solves” the traditional value problem, it encounters a different, better-motivated, and more formidable problem.