Main question: can we explain the intrinsic value of true belief by appeal to our natural curiosity?

Outline of talk:
§1: outline of the view that truth is valuable because it satisfies our curiosity
§2: interest as an emotion
§3: the appraisal structure of interest; divergence between interest and importance
§4: objections, and conclusion.

§1

When we inquire about something, we are interested in finding out the truth about that thing; truth is the goal or aim of inquiry.

Many of our inquiries are motivated by practical interests. But sometimes we engage in what Jonathan Kvanvig calls 'inquiry for its own sake.' (forthcoming) This kind of inquiry is motivated by our natural interest or curiosity.

We often have truth for its own sake as a goal of inquiry, and regard truth as intrinsically valuable. Goldman writes, ‘[t]ruth acquisition is often desired and enjoyed for its own sake, not for ulterior ends. It would hardly be surprising, then, that intellectual norms should incorporate true belief as an autonomous value, quite apart from its contribution to biological and practical ends.’ (1986: 98)

Kvanvig and Lynch think that our interest in the truth, or intellectual curiosity, is ‘open-ended or unrestricted.’ Grimm (2008: 728) We are curious about the truth as such, or naturally interested in how things stand on any subject.

This means that ‘it is attaining the truth per se, or finding out how things stand with respect to any subject, that has standing value for us.’

But this is a reductio of the view that we can explain epistemic value in terms of natural curiosity. For it seems obviously false that all true beliefs are valuable simply insofar as they are true; trivial true beliefs lack intrinsic value.
§2

What is interest or curiosity? Answer: interest is an emotion. Evidence: it shares many of the ‘components’ that are standardly used to characterize emotions.

(i) distinctive facial expressions for interest (and boredom)
(ii) distinctive vocal expressions
(iii) distinctive subjective experience
(iv) coherence between components

Emotions have distinctive patterns of appraisal: fear involves an appraisal of danger, guilt an appraisal that one has done something wrong, etc. Clearly, the core relational theme of interest or curiosity is the interesting.

But then it is implausible to suppose that our intellectual interest or natural curiosity is open-ended or unrestricted, since it is extremely implausible to suppose that we find all subjects, questions and topics interesting. That would imply that we could never rightly find some question or subject, object or event intrinsically boring.

It is finding out how things stand with respect to subjects that we appraise as interesting that has intrinsic value for us.

§3

This raises a different problem for the suggestion that we explain non-instrumental epistemic value in terms of natural curiosity.

The existence of trivial truths suggests that not all truths are intrinsically valuable. This suggests that epistemic value is tied up with importance, since we can take a belief to be important simply to the extent that it is non-trivial. However, curiosity doesn’t vary in any systematic way with appraisals of importance.

There is wide agreement – among psychologists, at least – on the appraisal variables that generate interest. One of the central appraisals is of novelty: “whether or not an event is new, sudden, or unfamiliar. For interest, this novelty check includes whether people judge something as new, ambiguous, complex, obscure, uncertain, mysterious, contradictory, unexpected, or otherwise not understood.” (Silvia, Exploring the Psychology of Interest, 2006, 57)

A second appraisal in interest is that of ‘coping potential.’ With interest, this refers to the subject’s appraisal of whether they can understand the relevant object.

In support: we tend to find old, expected, familiar things comfortable or enjoyable, but are interested in things which are unexpected, unfamiliar, mysterious, baffling.
Moreover, we quickly lose interest if it becomes obvious that we are unable to understand some topic or subject, whilst interest tends to be increased by the fact that some truth or understanding is within our grasp.

Empirical evidence shows that people tend to find simple things enjoyable and complex things interesting: this is apparent for appraisals of complex polygons, studies of anagrams, randomly generated melodies, and videos.

Research on exposure demonstrates that repetition increases liking and reduces interest. Experiments in literature bear this out: in one study, people were interested in stories with a surprise (i.e., uncertain) ending, and it was irrelevant whether the ending was happy or sad.

Studies also show that interest varies with appraisals of coping potential. Experts in art and music rate their capacity to understand their relative fields highly, and are more interested in complex (abstract) images and melodies than novices.

Other studies in aesthetics show that providing meaningful information (such as a biographical sketch of the artist, or of the context in which the work was produced) increases interest, in part because it makes the work more understandable.

However, there is significant evidence that importance is not a determinant of interest. What we find interesting, and what we find important, can diverge.

Consider the phenomenon of ‘seductive details’: the idea that interesting facts or features might distract the student from what is important in performing the task.

One study to test the hypothesis focused on biographical texts. Silvia writes: “people read a long text about the life of Horatio Nelson. The sentences within the text were categorized according to their importance (high vs. low) and interestingness (high vs. low). Interest had a bigger effect on recall than did importance; sentences that were uninteresting but important tended to be recalled least often.” (2006, 76)

This suggests – indeed, the experiment depends upon the fact – that appraisals of interestingness and of importance can diverge.

Silvia writes: “Several areas of research show that interest and importance diverge. ...One study, for example, found that key ideas in a passage about insects were ranked as important to the exposition but not at all interesting. Conversely, novel ideas about insects were rated as interesting but not at all important to the passage’s purpose, and presumably, to the reader’s goals.” (2006, 195)

In addition, experiments on motivation indicate that importance and interest are not necessarily linked. Increasing the importance of a boring task does not necessarily increase how interesting someone finds it (Sansone and Smith, 2000).
Common experience confirms the thesis: some of our most valuable possessions are ones that we're familiar with and hence not things that are interesting. And there are many things that I find interesting that I don't value.

Things are no different when we turn to epistemic value. Familiar truths (such as declarations of love) and predictable questions can be valuable but not interesting. And it's perfectly possible for truths and questions to be interesting but unimportant.

§4

Objections:
(i) Although ‘interesting’ and ‘important’ are different concepts, interestingness is nevertheless a form of epistemic value. So interesting truths have final value.

Response: to call a truth ‘amusing’ is also to positively appraise it, but we don't want to explain epistemic value in terms of the amusingness of true beliefs. Amusingness is incidental to final epistemic value.

(ii) Perhaps divergence between appraisals of interest and importance are cases where our emotional system malfunctions, since interest is meant to track importance. The possibility of divergence does not show that there are no systematic connections.

Response: there is a difference in rationality between standard cases of emotional malfunction – such as cases of recalcitrant fear – and cases where appraisals of interestingness and importance diverge, which casts doubt upon the analogy.

(iii) Although interest and importance can diverge, perhaps the function of curiosity is to alert us to novel information that is of potential importance.

Response: This does not provide a satisfactory explanation of non-instrumental value, since ‘potentially important’ means ‘potentially practically important.’ We are poorly placed to explain an interest in truth for its own sake by appealing to this.

(iv) An appraisal of some topic or question as interesting implies an appraisal of one’s capacity to understand the truth on that topic or question. But understanding the truth on some issue is a distinctive form of epistemic goodness.

Response: Trivial truths can be interesting but lack final value. And there isn’t anything distinctively valuable about knowledge or understanding of trivial truths.

Conclusion:
The attempt to explain the intrinsic value of true beliefs in terms of our natural curiosity avoids one problem but does not avoid another.