The Meno Problem and the Distinction between the Right and the Good in Epistemology

Tim Kraft

University of Göttingen
tim.kraft@phil.uni-goettingen.de

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Introduction I

The Meno problem (aka the value problem)

Why is knowledge better than mere true belief?

The Meno thesis (aka the basic/grounding intuition)

Knowledge is better than mere true belief.
Introduction II

Question

Why is the Meno problem a problem?

Answer

The following theses are plausible, but hard to reconcile:

1. MTB is good, indeed truth is the highest epistemic value.
2. K is not only good, it is even better than MTB.
3. Since $K \Rightarrow TB$, K can only be better than MTB in virtue of some property of K other than TB.

Note

This puzzle is often presented as a problem for this or that analysis of knowledge. I prefer to discuss the Meno problem as a self-standing problem.
Introducing my approach I

My starting point

1. **Pessimism.** I don’t know of a convincing answer to the Meno problem.

2. **Questioning the question.** If there’s no answer to a philosophical problem, it is a good idea to ask whether the question is a good one.

3. **Hypothesis.** The mistake consists in confusing evaluative and deontic questions.

4. **Result.** The Meno thesis is false: Knowledge isn’t better than mere true belief. But nevertheless there is a normative difference between knowledge and mere true belief.
Further motivation

- Some titles
  - This conference: “Epistemic Goodness”, not “Epistemic Normativity”
  - Wayne Riggs’ contribution to *New Waves in Epistemology*: “The Value Turn in Epistemology”, not “The Normative Turn in Epistemology”
  - Duncan Pritchard’s *Stanford Encyclopedia* article: “The Value of Knowledge”, not “The Normativity of Knowledge”
  - etc. etc.

- Even if you don’t agree with me that it is a mistake to frame the Meno problem as a problem about value, you might find it worthwhile to reflect on why the problem is always presented as a value problem.
1. Introducing the Meno Problem
2. Pessimism & Revisionism
3. Distinguishing the Right and the Good
4. What’s wrong with the Meno problem?
5. Summary
Pessimism

Options

1. Deriving the value of knowledge from the value of truth
2. Deriving the value of knowledge from the value of justification
3. Knowledge has a value of its own
Deriving the value of knowledge from the value of truth

Some varieties

A knower has a true belief which . . .

- . . . was acquired by an appropriate means (namely justification).
- . . . was acquired in a reliable way.
- . . . is stable.
- . . . the knower gets credit for (or . . . is an achievement of the knower).

and justification, stability, reliability, achievement are good because they contribute to the good of truth.

Problems

The swamping problem
Proposal

Pluralism about epistemic value: There are (at least) two independent epistemic values, truth \textbf{and} justification.

Problems

Then a justified false belief is better than a mere false belief. But it isn’t.
Knowledge has a value of its own

Proposal

Pluralism about epistemic value: There are (at least) two independent epistemic values, truth **and** knowledge.

Analogy: Mountaineers not only want to stand on the summit, they want to get there in a particular way. To reach the summit on their own feet is a final value for them. (Other analogies are e.g. the archery analogy.)

Problems

The analogy is implausible.
Three revisionary strategies

1. **Scepticism about epistemic values.** Revisionism can be motivated by scepticism about epistemic values in general or about the value of truth in particular.

2. **Example-driven revisionism.** Revisionism can be motivated by counter-examples, i.e. examples in which knowledge does not seem to be better than true belief.

3. **Reinterpreting the Meno thesis.**
Revisionism I

Scepticism about epistemic values

- The Meno problem rests on the assumption that true beliefs are good.
- I don’t question this assumption. I take it for granted.
- But I don’t presuppose a particular reading of the thesis that true beliefs are good.
- Maybe truth is a derived value, maybe it is a final value. If the latter, truth might be a constitutive goal of believing or we might possess a desire for truth that is a brute, non-reducible, yet universal human desire or ...
Revisionism II

Example-driven revisionism

There seem to be many counter-examples to the thesis that knowledge is always better than mere true belief.

- Phonebook. Neither K nor TB is valuable.
- Quick decisions. TB is good, but K isn’t.

Problems

1. But to defend the Meno thesis it is enough to show that true beliefs are pro tanto good and knowledge is pro tanto better.

2. But to defend the Meno thesis it is enough to show that true beliefs are typically good and knowledge is typically better.
Contributory value

Contributory vs overall

- Overall, all things considered vs. contributory, ceteris paribus, ceteris absentibus, pro tanto
- The Meno thesis: It is only *pro tanto* good to have true beliefs. It is only *pro tanto* better to know.
- This distinction isn’t the same distinction as the distinction between *good* and *epistemically, morally, aesthetically etc.* *good*
Reinterpreting the Meno thesis

There is a normative difference between knowledge and mere true belief. But is it best expressed in evaluative terms?

**Evaluative question** What do we aim at as believers?

**Deontic question** What should believers believe?
Two sorts of normativity

1. **The Right** (deontic normativity)
   - The right = what is to be done. Normativity as to-be-done-ness. (This is not a definition!)
   - The deontic vocabulary: “ought”, “should”, “must”, “obligated”, “committed”, “duty” etc.

2. **The Good** (evaluative normativity)
   - The good = the proper object of our desire or goals. Normativity as to-be-desired-ness. (This is not a definition!)
   - The evaluative vocabulary: “good”, “valuable”, “worthy of admiration” etc.
Examples I

Right without Good

1. Rules of etiquette
2. Rules of chess
3. Promising
Examples II

Good without right

1. Supererogation
2. Satisfizing/Maximizing
Fire extinguisher

- Is it good to have a fire extinguisher at your home? It depends. If no fire breaks out, it isn’t good to have one. It is potentially good to have a fire extinguisher. But being good and being potentially good are two different things.

- Is it right to have a fire extinguisher? It is. Even if no fire breaks out (and this particular fire extinguisher is never used), you should have a fire extinguisher, i.e. you should pay money for it, it is allowed to risk harming the environment etc.
Connections and differences

- The right and the good: Neither synonymous nor (necessarily) co-extensional.
- (a) If something is good (for you), you should care about it, promote it, try to get it etc.
- (b) If it is right to \( \varphi \), \( \varphi \)-ing is usually instrumental to achieving something good.
- But (a) and (b) are not exceptionless.
Applying the right/good distinction

1. There is a *normative* difference between knowledge and true belief.
2. When it is good to believe that \( p \)? A belief is good if it is true (always, but only *pro tanto*).
3. When is it right to believe that \( p \)? It is right to have a belief if it is justified.
The basic argument

Why care about justified beliefs?

- Some reasons for preferring something are of the sort "because it leads to something that is good".
- If being healthy is good (for you), you should promote your health.
- If it is good (for you) to have true beliefs, you should promote true beliefs.
- . . . and this requires using your cognitive capacities in a way that generate justified beliefs.

Plan

This is probably not controversial. My claim is that this is enough to explain the normative difference between knowledge and mere true belief. In the following I try to make good on this idea.
An objection

Objection

My account only works if believing is an action. But it isn’t.

Reply

That’s right. Believing isn’t an action. But deontic normativity is not only about actions, but about everything we are responsible for. As long as we’re responsible for our beliefs in some sense, talk of believing as one ought to be makes sense.
Knowledge as a mixed normative concept

Truth condition
- Knowledge implies truth.
- Because of the truth condition, knowing that $p$ implies that the person has a good belief.

Justification condition
- Knowledge implies justification.
- “Justification” is used as a placeholder term here.
- Because of the justification condition, knowing that $p$ implies that the person believes something that it is right to believe.
Knowledge as a mixed normative concept II

Mixed normative concept

**Evaluative component**  One necessary condition implies something that is valuable.

**Deontic component**  Another necessary condition implies that the person has done something right.
Some advantages

1. The unsolvability of the Meno problem can be explained.
2. It can be explained why justified false beliefs are not valuable.
3. Something useful about the secondary and tertiary value problem can be said.
Three Meno problems

Duncan Pritchard distinguishes three value problems:

1. Why is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief?
2. Why is knowledge more valuable than any proper subset of its parts?
3. Why is knowledge more valuable than being gettiered?
4. Why is knowledge more valuable than that which falls short of knowledge not merely as a matter of degree but of kind?

The tertiary Meno problem

- Quick answer. The difference is indeed not one of degree . . .
- . . .but it is not one of different kinds of value.
Three Meno problems II

The secondary Meno problem

- Knowledge isn’t better than being gettiered.
- The victim of a Gettier-type case believes what is right to believe and has a good belief.
- But she does so by chance. This possibility should not puzzle us. Once the right and the good are separated, both the possibility of achieving the good without doing what is right and the possibility of doing what is right and achieving the good only by chance arise quite naturally.
- We tend to be puzzled because of an assumption of harmony. The only thing that is bad about being gettiered is that this expectation of harmony is violated. The victim of a Gettier-type case might miss a second order goal, namely the goal of achieving the epistemic good by believing as one ought to believe.
Summary