

Intellectual Goods: An Epistemic Value Theory

Dissertation Abstract
Dennis Whitcomb

For any normative domain, we can theorize about what is good *in that domain*. Such theories include utilitarianism, a view about what is good *morally*. But there are many domains other than the moral; these include the prudential, the aesthetic, and the intellectual or *epistemic*. In this last domain, it is (for instance) good to be knowledgeable and bad to ignore evidence, quite apart from the morality, prudence, and aesthetics of these things. My dissertation builds a theory that stands to the epistemic domain as utilitarianism stands to the moral domain. It builds an *epistemic value theory*.

Most contemporary theorists try to base epistemic value on the aim of believing truths. **Chapter 1** lays out a problem for that approach: some truths are better than others. It is better, epistemically, to believe *significant* and deep truths about e.g. science or metaphysics, than it is to believe *trivial* truths about e.g. the number of blades of grass on one's lawn. The aim of believing truths cannot explain that fact, because trivial truths are truths nonetheless.

Chapter 2 characterizes two extreme sorts of views about what at bottom significance amounts to. On the one hand there is the sort of view Plato had, according to which the facts about what is significant and what is trivial are thoroughly mind-independent, determined by the nature of the world itself. On the other hand there is the sort of view Hume had, according to which the facts about what is significant and what is trivial are determined by human interests, and have nothing to do with mind-independent reality. I argue that neither of these extreme views can be true. We've got to find a more moderate view, a view that appeals to human interests *and* the mind-independent world. I build such a view by basing significance on curiosity and evidential support relations. This moderate view of significance is, I argue, superior to alternative views of Linda Zagzebski, Alvin Goldman, and Philip Kitcher.

Chapter 3 addresses new issues. It is typically thought that, for instance, knowledge is epistemically better than mere true belief. In virtue of what do such comparisons hold? And in virtue of what are states like knowledge and true belief epistemically valuable in the first place? Most answers to these two questions follow William James' slogan that truth is the good in the way of belief. But James was wrong: *knowledge* is the good in the way of belief. I use this new slogan to characterize a set of epistemic states and induce a (partial) ranking of them. This ranking answers our two questions. It also dissolves the popular "value problem" argument against reliabilism.

Whereas chapter 3 compares states like knowledge and true belief, **chapter 4** compares states like *significant true belief* and *insignificant true belief*. It thus combines the ranking of epistemic states with the theory of the nature of significance. It develops a new approach to this combined topic. This new approach is, I argue, superior to alternatives on offer from Zagzebski, Goldman, and Isaac Levi.

Chapter 5 applies the foregoing views to the topic of wisdom. For many centuries wisdom was standardly taken to be a high-end epistemic good. Recent philosophy is estranged from that tradition; this chapter tries to reunite them. I critically survey the extant views of the nature of wisdom and then defend a new one. This new view is similar to Aristotle's in allowing for two varieties of wisdom, the practical and the theoretical; but it breaks from Aristotle on several grounds. It follows from this new view, in combination with the views from chapters 1-4, that wisdom is a high-end epistemic good.

Chapter 6 applies all of these views to the social realm. Just as theories of social justice address *not* the prudential value of individual goods like happiness *but instead* the proper distribution of these prudential goods across people, this chapter addresses *not* the epistemic value of individual goods like knowledge *but instead* the proper distribution of these epistemic goods across people. It engages, we might say, in "distributive social epistemology". I critically evaluate Goldman's recent work in distributive social epistemology and produce an alternative approach.

That alternative approach, along with the approach to individual epistemic value developed in the other chapters, is summarized in a system of principles about what is epistemically better than what else. This system of principles stands to the epistemic domain as utilitarianism stands to the moral domain; it is an epistemic value theory.