

Utilitarian Epistemology

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Introduction: epistemic value

- Intuition: there is special *epistemic* value.
- It should be consonant with one's value theory.
- Deontology can accommodate this (usually via internalism).
- Virtue ethics can accommodate this (usually via externalism).
- It seems utilitarianism cannot accommodate this.

My goals

Today I'll sketch arguments according to which

- Utilitarian epistemic value makes sense
- The background value theory has impact on epistemology
- (In particular: utilitarianism can help epistemology)

Outline

- 1 Utilitarian epistemology
- 2 The value of knowledge
 - Current answers
 - Utilitarianism and the value of knowledge
- 3 Justification and epistemic responsibility

An analogy

- Money is not of intrinsic or final value.
- Still, it's worthy of study.
- One can even speak loosely of “financial value”.
- (Even when it's of *negative* instrumental value.)
- A utilitarian should hear “epistemic value” the same way.

Utilitarian value as expected utility

- Anything with causal powers *could* lead to high or low utility.
- To a utilitarian, any non-welfare “value” is via *expected utility*.
- The charitable act has high expected utility relative to the murderous one.
- Utilitarian generalizations about value must be assigned under uncertainty.

Financial value

- Financier:
 - Diversified no-load mutual funds are of high financial value
 - Roulette betting is of low financial value
- Even though:
 - The fund tanks, and the roulette number comes up
 - The fund profits a cruel warlord, and the roulette losses feed starving children

The epistemic analog

- Utilitarian epistemologist:
 - Deduction from confident beliefs is of high epistemic value
 - Wishful thinking is of low epistemic value
- Even though:
 - The deduced belief is false, and the wishfully thought one is true
 - The true deduced belief profits a warlord, and the false wishfully thought one comforts starving children

The “value problem”

An old problem from Plato's *Meno*:

The “value problem”

Why is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief?

After all, either one will get you to Larissa!

Reliabilism and the value problem

- Reliabilism \approx knowledge is true belief formed by a reliable process.
- Knowledge and true belief differ only in extrinsic properties.
- Reliabilism must say knowledge and mere true belief have the same value
- —at least, given that value supervenes on intrinsic properties.
- Zagzebski's coffee and swamping

A first reliabilist response

- Reliabilist:
 - Knowledge is the mere true belief *plus* the reliable process.
 - Thus it's more valuable!
- But:
 - How is knowledge this fused, historical state?
 - Pritchard's "secondary value problem" and Gettiered beliefs
- The internalist-deontologist, I think, is in similar trouble.

The credit solution

- Virtue epistemologist:
 - Knowledge requires true belief *because* of epistemic virtue (rules out Gettier cases!)
 - Knowledge can have extrinsic but final value (compare Olympic medals)
 - Knowledge is of more value because it's similarly of *credit* to the believer
- But:
 - Is knowledge always an *achievement*? (testimony, perception)
 - Is knowledge really valuable for *symbolic* reasons?

An amended value problem

The value problem: utilitarian version

Why is knowledge of more *expected utility* than mere true belief?

- This is the only hope from utilitarian standpoint.
- Plato's answer was in this spirit: "by its binding ties."
- Williamson: but "mere true beliefs can be held with dogmatic confidence, and knowledge lost through forgetting."

Williamson's answer

- Williamson:
 - Knowledge is of more instrumental value because it's harder to shake.
 - For example: mere true beliefs based on false premises are vulnerable.
- Kvanvig:
 - Knowledge is in many ways *more* fragile.
 - It is at most a contingent matter about local causal tendencies and psychological facts.
 - (This point seems to generalize to *any* account of knowledge's *instrumental* value.)

The financial analogy again

- To see the uniquely utilitarian view, let's develop that financial analogy.
- Intuition: *luck* makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.

Table: The financial analogy

<i>epistemology</i>	<i>finance</i>
true belief	profit
knowledge	earnings
mere true belief	windfall

A revisionist defense

- “Why is knowledge of more expected utility than mere true belief?” \approx
- “Why are earnings of more expected utility than windfalls?”
- Answer: they’re *not!*
- “Why is a charitable act more valuable than a murder that results in the same amount of utility?”
- To assume there is an answer begs the question against the utilitarian.
- Similarly (one step removed) for our cases at hand.

The moral

- Remember: the utilitarian assigns non-welfare states value by expected utility,
- and expected utility calculations *only make sense under uncertainty*.
- The value problem stipulates that both result in the same instrumental value,
- just like one can stipulate that some murder leads to high utility.
- The situation *is* like Zagzebski's coffee!

Explaining away intuitions

- Of course this answer scorns our intuitions.
- This is familiar ground for a utilitarian, and they have a familiar answer:
- rules of thumb are often mistaken for just-plain, categorical *rules*.
- Compare: which is more preferable,
 - ① the average life?
 - ② a life with the same total welfare, but you're stinking rich?
- Our intuitions may incline us to the rich life, though on reflection they shouldn't.

More explaining away

- There's another strategy for explaining away intuitions, particular to this case:
- knowledge may seem more valuable because it makes sense to *seek* it.
- Seeking mere true belief, on the other hand, is at best unwise,
- and at worst incoherent.
- (Just like seeking a financial windfall.)

Goldman's answer

- Goldman's recent "value autonomization" response:
- a psychological story like mine about value *attribution*,
- plus a claim that such intuitions track what's *actually* valuable.
- But:
 - We don't think similar arguments apply to money.
 - Intuitions carry no evidential weight when undermined.

Justification as epistemic responsibility

- A common intuition is that epistemic justification is epistemic *responsibility*.
- Justified beliefs are “blameless” or “praiseworthy” .
- This accounts for two major *desiderata* of epistemic justification:
 - justification is a *positive* evaluation
 - false beliefs can have it

Problems with epistemic responsibility

But:

- ① Epistemic responsibility does not seem necessary for justification.
 - Beliefs not under our control often look justified, blameless, and even praiseworthy.
 - Example: perception
 - In effect, this picture seems to beg the question against the externalist.
- ② Epistemic responsibility seems to require doxastic voluntarism.
 - This is more problematic than “regular” free will.
 - The libertarian about belief formation seems to foreclose on cognitive science.
 - Typical compatibilist strategies won’t work at the low cognitive level.

Utilitarian responsibility generally

- The problems should sound familiar from normative debates on action theory.
- The utilitarian line:
 - Value does not require free will
 - There is no “true” moral responsibility (retribution is unjust; there is no desert)
 - “ x is responsible for y ” \approx “ x is the most relevant locus to apply change with respect to outcomes like y .”

Responsible people

- Normally, *people* are responsible in this sense,
- because people are the best place to apply such change.
- This is because:
 - The causes further behind them are typically opaque
 - (Contrast the hypnotized murderer)
 - People are more response-*able*

Utilitarian *epistemic* responsibility

- Epistemic responsibility is the same.
- Risk in belief-formation is ubiquitous,
- but people are usually the best level at which to control for such risk.
- A *person* is epistemically responsible, to the utilitarian, if and only if no effort to change the thinker for better (future) epistemic results is appropriate.
- This accounts for internalist intuitions.

Utilitarian justification and externalism

- Moral responsibility revolution: maybe factors outside the person are morally responsible!
- Epistemological revolution: maybe factors outside the person are epistemically responsible!
- Justification as utilitarian responsibility thus allows for justification externalism.

Naturalistic epistemology

- This picture can happily take on cognitive science.
- Person responsible \approx investment bank responsible—
- each is really a teeming hierarchy of functional organization.
- In both cases responsibility is best allocated on a more fine-grained level.

Conclusion

- A utilitarian epistemologist:
 - can account for epistemic value as a financier accounts for financial value
 - has a good story for why the value of knowledge problem is such a challenge
 - can capture the good parts of epistemic justification as responsibility without the problematic assumptions
- Other possible implications of utilitarian epistemology:
 - an answer to Pritchard's puzzle about *luck* and knowledge
 - an insouciance about skepticism ("all profits are windfalls")
- Of course, all this is a *sketch*, so far . . .