

Utilitarian epistemology and the value of knowledge

Stephen Petersen
steve@stevepetersen.net

Department of Philosophy
Niagara University

Value of Knowledge Conference
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
28 August 2007

Outline

- 1 Motivating utilitarian epistemology
 - Good thinking
 - Against deontic and virtue epistemology
- 2 Elaborating utilitarian epistemology
 - Utilitarian value and epistemology
 - Secure true belief
 - Value under uncertainty
- 3 Applying utilitarian epistemology
 - Skepticism
 - Justification
 - Summary

Good thinking

- Epistemology as the study of “good thinking”
- Requires theory of value
- Should be a *unified* theory
- Leaves three going options

Quick potshots

- Deontic epistemology
 - Accessibility issues
 - Doxastic voluntarism
- Virtue epistemology
 - Questionable *Meno* solution
 - Odious brute facts

The instrumental value of epistemic states

- For utilitarianism, only welfare has final value
- Thus of course knowledge not of more *final* value than true belief

The Meno problem: utilitarian version

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

- The original Socratic answer in this spirit

Secure true belief

Secure true belief: version 1

Knowledge that p has more expected utility than the mere true belief because knowledge is more likely to stick around.

- Problems with the Socratic version
- Problems with Williamson version
- Knowledge requires good belief *formation*

Value under uncertainty

- A statue insured has more expected utility—
- until you stipulate the uninsured one is safe!
- *Expected* utility only makes sense under uncertainty

Uncertain futures, uncertain origins

- Belief with respect to p that's acquired by good methods is worth more than one acquired randomly—
- until you stipulate that the randomly-acquired belief got the truth!
- Which statue has more expected utility:
 - the one on sale in a flea market
 - the one on auction at Sotheby's
- What if it's the same statue on sale?

Total cost of belief ownership

- The same statue will in fact cost more at Sotheby's
- Perhaps it is reasonably valued higher
- Total cost of ownership as measure of assessed expected utility
- In this sense we value knowledge more than mere true belief

Secure true belief

Secure true belief: version 2

Knowledge that p has more expected utility than mere true belief because knowledge will maintain the value of the true belief through a wider array of circumstances (including past circumstances).

- Compare Unger on non-accidentality: non-*riskiness*
- Nozick, safety, and cushions of possible worlds
- Closure problems

Skepticism and risk

- All beliefs insecure
- Can choose skepticism or possible world quantifier restriction
- Compare: “is the bridge secure, or risky?”
 - Whether truth or usefulness is the standard does not matter
 - What matters: the details of the risks
 - (*i.e.* the expected utility of crossing)
- Similarly, on this picture skepticism does not matter

Utilitarianism and epistemic responsibility

- Non-risky true belief in the externalist, Nozick family
- Need a place for epistemic responsibility
- Compare the determinist approach to moral responsibility
- The real interest: expected utility of praise / blame
- Epistemic responsibility as special case

Justification and epistemic agency

- So understood, the utilitarian can adopt the “justification as epistemic responsibility” slogan
- Agent as locus of control for best epistemic change
 - explains justification's tie to internalist intuitions
 - explains justification's tie to knowledge
 - explains puzzles with justification post-Gettier
- The naturalistic epistemic agent
- Externalist revolutions in moral responsibility and epistemology

Advantages of utilitarian epistemology

- compatibility with naturalism
- an answer to the Meno problem
- an account of the appeal behind Nozickian projects
- a novel insouciance about skepticism
- an explanatory account of justification
- a unified picture of epistemic value

Thanks

Thanks to:

- Dennis Whitcomb, Western Washington University
- Marc Alspecter-Kelly, Western Michigan University
- Ashley McDowell, Kalamazoo College
- Niagara University
- Value of Knowledge organizers
- You