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EPISTEMIC STANDARDS AND VALUE: A PUZZLE

Jumbly GRINDROD

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I present a puzzle that arises if we accept i) that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief and ii) that whether a person counts as knowing is dependent upon a context-sensitive epistemic standard. Roughly, the puzzle is that if both claims are true, then we should always seek to keep the epistemic standard as low as possible, contrary to what seems like appropriate epistemic behaviour. I consider and reject a number of different ways of avoiding this consequence before presenting my own solution to the puzzle: that any view that posits a context-sensitive epistemic standard must relativize epistemic value as well.

KEYWORDS: epistemic standard, epistemic value, pragmatic encroachment, contextualism

1. The Puzzle

Here are two widely-defended claims:

> VALUE: Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. (Swinburne 2001; Zagzebski 2003)
>
> CONTEXT: What counts as knowing within a given context depends upon a context-sensitive epistemic standard (Cohen 1988; Stanley 2005; DeRose 2009; Fantl and McGrath 2009)

VALUE is of course a common claim made within the epistemic value literature and has as its origins Plato's *Meno*. Some will resist this claim. For example, Kvanvig (2003) has argued that it is impossible to identify a valuable property that knowledge has and true belief lacks and that would serve to differentiate between knowledge and Gettiered belief. I am not concerned with Gettier cases here, and for much of this paper I could accept the weaker claim that knowledge is generally more valuable than true belief, or qualify VALUE such that it does not entail that knowledge is more valuable than Gettiered belief. For simplicity's sake, however, I will keep VALUE in its stronger form. CONTEXT should be viewed here as something that would be accepted by pragmatic encroachment views of knowledge as well as by epistemic contextualists (although more will be said on this shortly). The key idea uniting such views is that certain contextual factors that were previously thought to

be epistemically irrelevant in fact affect the epistemic standard by which we determine whether a subject knows or not.

Considering that these two claims are often defended, or even assumed, it is worth considering whether they can be held concurrently. This paper is concerned with a possible unattractive consequence of doing so: if knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, and we generally know more when the epistemic standard is set at a lower, less demanding level, then it looks like we should always aim to keep the epistemic standard as low as possible, and look upon any raising of the standard as regrettable.[1]

If knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, and we generally know more when the epistemic standard is set at a lower, less demanding level, then, other things being equal, it looks like it would be a better state of affairs if we kept the epistemic standard as low as we can. If knowledge is what we are after, then why not just ensure that we keep the epistemic standard as low as possible?

There may of course be reasons why one finds themselves operating with a particular epistemic standard, and the apparent value lost by operating with a higher epistemic standard may be outweighed by other considerations. But even with this proviso in place, the thought that, other things being equal, a given agent is better off operating with a lower epistemic standard is an odd one, and this is certainly not how the picture of an epistemic standard is usually painted. Usually, it is thought that a varying epistemic standard reflects the fact that different levels of inquiry are appropriate to different contexts – so that it is entirely appropriate that in the courtroom we employ a more stringent standard than we do in the pub. An exception may be contextualist accounts of sceptical arguments, which are sometimes viewed as a way of painting the sceptic in a negative light: when the sceptic raises the epistemic standard to such a high level, and in doing so deprives us of knowledge of the external world, they do something regrettable – they act like a bully (Brister 2009). But the worry here is that VALUE and CONTEXT, along with certain auxiliary claims linking value and desire or action, entail that, *ceteris paribus*, we should always strive to keep the epistemic standard as low as possible, and disapprove of instances where it is raised. Other things being equal, we should avoid the courtroom and stay in the pub. I take it that this is isn't a particularly attractive

[1] In considering this problem, I do rely on the idea that if something is valuable, then (in some appropriately weak sense, and all other things being equal), we ought to try to attain it, and also that it is appropriate to *hope* that we attain it. Without spelling out precise principles that make good of this idea, I take it that the rough idea itself is plausible enough insofar as it makes sense of the links between value and rational action. Indeed, the original motivation of positing the value of knowledge is precisely that it is something that we tend to aim and hope for.

consequence of the view we are considering. In what follows, I will consider and reject a range of responses to this puzzle, before presenting my own solution.

2. Knowledge Attributions and Knowledge

In outlining CONTEXT, I was explicit that the claim would be accepted by both pragmatic encroachment theorists and epistemic contextualists. But perhaps it is not appropriate to group the two sets of views together in this way. It could be claimed that there are two senses in which one might accept (as CONTEXT states) that *what counts as* knowing within a context depends upon a context-sensitive epistemic standard, and only one of these senses leads to the puzzle that we are considering. In particular, the epistemic contextualist is providing an account of the truth conditions of knowledge attributions, and so only accepts CONTEXT to the extent that it is equivalent to the claim that the truth value of knowledge attributions can vary according to a context-sensitive epistemic standard. Accordingly, the epistemic contextualist isn't strictly committed to the claim that in lowering the epistemic standard, we thereby increase the amount of *knowledge* around; they are only committed to the claim that lowering the epistemic standard will render more knowledge-attributing sentences true. In this way, they could avoid the puzzle. That contextualism avoids the puzzle might even be seen as a consideration in its favour.

However, I don't think the contextualist can easily evade the puzzle this way. For this response to work, there must be some plausibility in the idea that we can view the two projects of i) capturing the truth conditions of knowledge attributions and ii) capturing the nature and extension of knowledge, as independent of one another. In providing an account of when sentences containing a denoting term are true (rather than merely acceptable) we are thereby providing an account of the extension of that term i.e. the set of things in the world to which the word applies and the set of things to which it does not. So, in providing an account of the truth of knowledge attributions, it is typically thought that we are giving some account of where knowledge is present and where it is absent. To suggest otherwise seems to imply either that the contextualist is not providing *truth* conditions in the fullest sense of the word "true" or that epistemologists are not really working on knowledge in the ordinary sense, contrary to what their methodology would suggest. The burden of proof is on those who think that there is no such link between knowledge and the truth of knowledge attributions to explain why that is the case (Grindrod 2020). Without any such explanation, the default position should be that the contextualist is just as subject to the puzzle as the pragmatic encroachment theorist.

3. We Cannot Lower the Standard

A second response is to claim that the epistemic standard is not something we *can* lower, so we don't have the choice available to us to lower the standard in order to maximise the amount of knowledge we possess. It is certainly true that, whenever some account of the epistemic standard is given such that it varies across different contexts, a detailed account is given of how the standard can be raised, but little is said on how it can be lowered. There is usually mention of the epistemic standard returning to a lower point once the conversation has moved on sufficiently. One is given the impression that the epistemic standard is elasticated, and is stretched upwards by raisings, only to return to its ordinary resting position.

But even if it is the case that we have no mechanism available for lowering the epistemic standard beyond waiting for the conversation to move on, this does not get rid of the problem. For it would still be the case that, *ceteris paribus*, any raising of the epistemic standard should be disapproved or viewed as regrettable for the loss of value that accompanies it. Yet this is not, I take it, an attractive view to hold (e.g. it is not regrettable that science labs or courtrooms employ a more stringent epistemic standard).

4. We Have No Control Over the Epistemic Standard

In response to the previous reply, it might be claimed that we actually have no control over the epistemic standard going up or down. Robin McKenna (2013) has argued for a view of this kind. He has argued that "S knows p" is true in c only if S can rule out the alternatives that *ought to be* salient in c. The idea here is that there is a normative fact about which alternatives ought to be salient within a context, and we as epistemic agents have to try to track what those alternatives are. It is not something that is within our control via the manoeuvres made within a context.

But even this view would not really dispose of the problem, for even if changes in the epistemic standard are not something that is under our control, we are still able to *hope* that the standards remain low for the added value that it brings, and bemoan that it is ever raised. Just as we can hope that a hurricane doesn't hit our town for the bad consequences it will bring, even if we have no control over the matter, the thought is that we can hope that our normative situation is such that the standard does not need to be raised. Yet even this is an unattractive consequence of the view and so no solution to the puzzle is provided.

5. Epistemic Value As a Function of Both Position and Standard

Perhaps the best solution to the puzzle is to supplement our theory of epistemic value with claims beyond VALUE. In particular, we could avoid the puzzle if our theory of epistemic value states that knowledge according to a higher epistemic standard is more valuable than knowledge according to a lower epistemic standard. In that case, raising the epistemic standard would not be regrettable because it at least gives us the opportunity to reach this more valuable state. Epistemic value could be viewed as a function of both epistemic position (i.e. whether the subject knows or not) and epistemic standard, with the epistemic standard serving as a kind of multiplier such that the higher the standard, the more valuable the knowledge is. This would avoid the undesirable consequence that we should always seek to lower the epistemic standard. It may well be the case that raising the epistemic standard will rob you of your knowledge, but at least in a high standards context an even more valuable epistemic state would become available to us.

However, with this solution we get something of the reverse problem occurring. If we have a theory of epistemic value whereby knowledge in a higher standard is more valuable than knowledge in a lower standard, then it seems that those of us who possess reasons for their belief that would be sufficient for high-standards knowledge are incentivized to seek out those higher standards. But again, it seems implausible that we are incentivized in this way. We don't have any inclination to adopt the highest standard that our epistemic reasons will allow. Instead, the epistemic standard is determined by the kind of inquiry we are engaged in, the practical stakes involved in being right, the time and energy we have available to dedicate to the inquiry, as well as where our interests and natural curiosity lie. This will determine whether or not we engage in a high-standards inquiry, and the idea that there is a default pressure towards adopting a higher standard is in tension with this.

Furthermore, some version of the original problem still remains. Say S believes p and is currently operating under an epistemic standard such that their belief does not constitute knowledge. There is little prospect of them gaining any further evidence or justification for their belief (e.g. it concerns something that happened to them alone a long time ago). But S's reason for believing is such that, S *would* count as knowing were a lower epistemic standard in play. On the view we are considering, it seems that S would still *ceteris paribus* be better off seeking out the lower standard. These cases suggest that it would be wrong to have the epistemic standard figure in our calculations of epistemic value. If anything, it is more plausible that the epistemic standard is set based on the kind of inquiry that would prove

epistemically valuable rather than epistemic value itself being determined by how the epistemic standard is set.

6. Epistemic Value Relative to a Context

To arrive at our final position, we have to begin with an initial suggestion for solving the puzzle. Perhaps epistemic value does not attach to knowledge *per se* but attaches to knowledge in virtue of some underlying property that knowledge possesses to a greater degree than mere true belief (say, justification). Imagine for instance, that in order to know, you require some minimal level of justification, and imagine further that it is the justification of a belief that determines its value. In that case, this would seem to make sense of VALUE – knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because it enjoys a higher level of justification. Furthermore, we could understand CONTEXT as the claim that the threshold of minimal justification required to count as knowing can vary across contexts. Understood in this way, there would be no added value in moving to a lower epistemic standard, as the underlying property of value – justification – would remain invariant.

Perhaps this is the right approach to take to avoid the puzzle. Elsewhere, I have argued that a contextualist version of this account of epistemic value as attaching to justification may prove to be problematic in accounting for the distinctive value of knowledge (Grindrod 2019). I won't press that point here, however. Instead, I want to question whether this view is really consistent with VALUE. Consider S1's belief that p that is held in c1 and S2's belief that p that is held in c2. Suppose that the justification for S1's belief is 0.8 and the minimal threshold of justification for knowledge in c1 is 0.81. So S1 doesn't know that p in c1. The justification for S2's belief is 0.75 and the minimal threshold of justification for knowledge in c2 is 0.74. So S2 does know that p in c2. By VALUE, S2's belief is more valuable than S1's. But according to the view we are considering, S1's belief is more valuable than S2's.[2] I take that it is implausible that any object could be both more and less valuable than another object at a given time and in the same respect. So it seems then that in adopting this view, VALUE must be rejected.

Instead, the most straightforward way to preserve the spirit of VALUE while rejecting its letter would be to claim that knowledge is only more valuable than true belief relative to a context:

> CONTEXTUALISED-VALUE: Knowing that p in context c is more valuable than merely truly believing p in context c.

[2] See: (Grindrod 2019) for discussion of similar cases albeit applied to specific forms of contextualism.

This still seems to make good of the motivation behind VALUE insofar as it explains why, in any given situation, I would prefer to know rather than merely believe. But crucially, I would not be able to use CONTEXTUALISED-VALUE to infer that S2's belief is more valuable than S1's.

I suggest that CONTEXTUALISED-VALUE provides the best solution to the puzzle. But in order to adopt CONTEXTUALISED-VALUE, we need not be committed to the claim that epistemic value attaches to justification (or whatever property a sufficient degree of which differentiates knowledge from true belief). An alternative picture would be that while knowledge per se is more valuable than mere true belief, such value judgements are themselves contained within a context, so that it is essentially not possible to make value comparisons across distinct epistemic contexts. In that respect, in accepting CONTEXTUALISED-VALUE, we would not be forced into claiming epistemic value attaches to justification (or some other property of knowledge).

7. Conclusion

In this short paper, I have presented a puzzle regarding epistemic value and epistemic standards and I have presented a solution by way of relativizing epistemic value to a standard. If such views as pragmatic encroachment theories and contextualist theories want to maintain something resembling VALUE – which is widely taken to be independently plausible – they are forced to contextualise epistemic value, to make the superior value of knowledge over mere true belief relative to an epistemic standard. This may well be a plausible position for such views to hold, but it has not been previously recognised that these views are forced into this position.

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