

## Reliability and the Value of Knowledge<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Is knowledge more valuable than mere true belief? Few question the value of having true beliefs, and insofar as having knowledge entails (at least) having a true belief, we value knowledge. But traditionally it has been assumed that whatever it takes to turn true belief into knowledge has some *additional* value. Traditionally, then, philosophers have been committed to what I will call the ‘Value Principle’.

**VP:** Knowledge is always more valuable than (mere) true belief.

This formulation of the principle suggests a corollary:

**C1:** A condition of adequacy on a complete theory of knowledge is that it entail (and preferably explain) VP.

Despite its venerability and philosophical pedigree, this principle (and its corollary) has seldom received attention in the contemporary epistemological literature. However, some recent work in epistemology suggests that philosophers are beginning to investigate whether, how, and to what extent knowledge is valuable.

It should be noted that C1 places a serious constraint on theories of knowledge. Of course, virtually no philosophical theory meets all conditions of adequacy that could reasonably be placed upon it. Some such conditions are more important than others. But, the more

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the following people for their comments and helpful discussion on earlier drafts of this essay: Karen Antell, Reinaldo Elugardo, James Hawthorne, Jonathan Kvanvig, and Linda Zagzebski.

important one takes VP to be, the more serious breaching C1 becomes. And VP is taken seriously by a great many epistemologists, going at least as far back as Plato.

Why, then, this sudden new worry about whether, how, and to what extent knowledge is valuable? There are, no doubt, many reasons; but a major one I think is the popularity of so-called “naturalized epistemology.” Though many diverse epistemological theories call themselves “naturalized,” one common thread among them is the commitment to accounting for all terms of epistemic appraisal in completely naturalistic terms. Thus, all normative terms and concepts must be reduced to, explained by, or accounted for by plain old statements of physical facts. Those that cannot be given such an account should be rejected. Alvin Goldman, one of the foremost epistemologists in the naturalized camp, makes this goal explicit in his book

*Epistemology and Cognition*.

In making an evaluation, a speaker assumes some factual basis, or grounds, for the evaluation .... In general, evaluative status does not enter the world autonomously. It always ‘supervenes’, as philosophers sometimes put it, on purely factual states of affairs

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What has to be true of a belief for it to qualify as justified? What factual standard determines justifiedness? . . .

It is not admissible to answer by using other terms of epistemic appraisal, such as ‘rational’, ‘well-grounded’, or the like. We need nonevaluative terms or conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Non-naturalists have been dubious that one can account for the normative value of epistemic terms of appraisal in purely “natural” terms. In particular, Goldman’s theory of justification, “process reliabilism,” has come under recent attack as being unable to meet C1. At least three different epistemologists, Ward Jones, Jonathan Kvanvig, and Linda Zagzebski,<sup>3</sup> with

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<sup>2</sup> Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Ward Jones, “Why Do We Value Knowledge?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997); Jonathan Kvanvig, “Why Should Inquiring Minds Want to Know?” *The Monist* 81 (1998); Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*

widely varying epistemological convictions have argued that process reliabilism cannot account for the value-superiority of knowledge over merely or accidentally true belief. If these critics are correct, then adherents to simple versions of process reliabilism must either give up VP and C1, or else give up their view. Giving up VP would be a fairly serious matter, and is not a path many epistemologists would be happy to traverse.

But are the critics correct? I shall argue that the answer is “no.” The critics’ arguments rest on two false assumptions about reliabilism. They assume, first, that reliabilism need be committed to the view that the entire value of knowledge is constituted by the value of the known belief (hereafter, “the belief assumption”). Second, they assume that reliabilism must be interpreted along instrumentalist lines (hereafter, “the instrumentalist assumption”). That is, they assume that the *only* value conferred by reliable processes is the instrumental value of their propensity to produce true, rather than false, beliefs. While some reliabilists may be committed to one or the other (or both) of these, reliabilism *per se* needn’t be. Contrary to the arguments of the three critics listed above, an account can be given of the value of knowledge that both accords well with reliabilism, and meets the demands of VP. In what follows I will provide just such an account. First, though, I will briefly present the arguments of our critics, showing that they rest on the mistaken assumptions already mentioned. After showing that reliabilism need not be committed to either assumption, I will describe an alternative way to construe (at least some of) the value of knowledge in which reliabilism is vindicated of the charge that it is in conflict with VP.

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) & “From Reliabilism to Virtue Epistemology,” presented at the World Congress of Philosophy, 1998.

Before proceeding, however, I wish to make two important caveats. First, I am not a proponent of reliabilism: I do not think that reliabilism provides an adequate account of either knowledge or justification. Nor do I claim that my account of the value of knowledge accounts for *all* the value knowledge has for us, not even all of its “epistemic value.” Though my aims are more limited, they are still significant: I will show that reliabilism captures an important *part* of the value of knowledge. Having a true belief that is reliably produced (or sustained) is more valuable than having that same true belief “accidentally.” Thus, every instance of *knowing* (as construed by reliabilism) that *p* is more valuable than every instance of *merely believing truly* that *p*. Therefore, though I do not believe that reliabilism alone is an adequate theory of knowledge or justification, I do believe that one cannot account for a certain component of the value of knowledge without it. Thus, if one wants to account for the full value of knowledge over and above the value of mere true belief, one’s theory of knowledge must contain a reliabilist component.

## 2. The Case Against Simple Reliabilism

Though neither Jones, Kvanvig, nor Zagzebski explicitly spells out the version of reliabilism being attacked, it is clear that each has in mind the following simple version of process reliabilism.<sup>4</sup>

**Simple Reliabilism** (hereafter, simply “reliabilism”): S knows that *p* iff: S believes that *p*, *p* is true, and *p* is the product of a reliable belief-forming process.

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<sup>4</sup> Zagzebski thinks her criticism of Simple Reliabilism also demonstrates the inadequacy of more sophisticated versions of reliabilism, such as Ernest Sosa’s Virtue Reliabilism, Alvin Plantinga’s Proper Functionalism, and John Greco’s Agent Reliabilism. (See Zagzebski 1998) However, my discussion of her criticism against Simple Reliabilism depends in no way upon anything that distinguishes Simple Reliabilism from its more sophisticated cousins. For ease of explication, I will restrict my discussion to the simple version.

Kvanvig does not actually mention the term “reliabilism,” but he criticizes the attempt to derive the value of knowledge from the instrumental value of justification as a means to truth. When we turn the discussion to Kvanvig’s views, I will show that his more abstract argument applies straightforwardly to reliabilism, and is similar to the criticisms offered by Jones and Zagzebski.

### **Jones & Zagzebski**

The arguments given by Jones and Zagzebski are sufficiently similar to be treated together and their presentations of their arguments complement each other nicely. Jones’s argument is in some ways the most straightforward, so I begin with it. Jones argues<sup>5</sup> that what he calls “epistemic instrumentalism” is incapable of accounting for the value of knowledge. Epistemic instrumentalism is a family of theories of knowledge that accept the following two claims:

**A. The end of belief-formation is to gain true beliefs.**

**B. Justification is a means to attaining the end of true belief.<sup>6</sup>**

Thus, epistemic instrumentalists accept a means/end analysis of justification and/or knowledge. Jones considers reliabilism to be the “simplest and most popular” instrumentalist theory. So he deploys the argument against instrumentalism in terms of a reliabilist theory in particular.

Though less committed to the truth of VP than is Zagzebski, Jones nonetheless begins his paper by assuming something like it. “It would seem that an account of why we value knowledge is a desideratum of any so-called ‘theory of knowledge’.” This does not quite commit Jones to VP, but it does lead him to consider whether reliabilism meets C1. And he, like Zagzebski, argues

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

that reliabilism (and instrumentalist views in general) fails to do so, and so fails to account for VP.

The reliabilist takes the goal of belief-formation to be true belief. The value of true belief is taken for granted. Justifying (that is, reliable) processes are valuable because they tend to end in true beliefs .... But where does this valuing of true belief and reliable processes leave knowledge? *If we care about justifying processes merely because they lead to true beliefs, then why should we value the true beliefs gained from justifying processes over the ones that are not so gained?* If truth is the goal of epistemic inquiry, then why do we care whether someone gets her beliefs via a reliable method or via an unreliable method?<sup>7</sup> [emphasis added]

In this passage, Jones argues that a true belief produced by a reliable process is no more valuable than a true belief produced in any other way. The process is valuable only by virtue of its connection to truth. Its value is derivative of the value of having true beliefs. This is where Zagzebski is, perhaps, a bit more clear.

A reliable process is good only because of the good of the product of the process. A reliable espresso-maker is good because espresso is good. A reliable water-dripping faucet is not good because dripping water is not good. Reliability *per se* has no value or disvalue. Its value or disvalue derives solely from the value or disvalue of that which it reliably produces. So the value of the product is transferred to the process. *But the value of the process is not transferred back again to the product.* [emphasis added]<sup>8</sup>

The point of both these passages is that once we have a true belief, there is no more value in its having come from a reliable process than its having come from an unreliable one. To borrow Zagzebski's analogy, if you like espresso, you will not care whether your delicious cup came from a machine that nearly always produces a great brew or instead came from an old, unreliable machine that almost never makes a drinkable espresso, but has managed to produce a great drink

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 425

<sup>8</sup> Zagzebski (1998), 1.

this time. Similarly, if what we value is having true beliefs, we won't care whether the true belief came from a reliable process or not. Either way, we got what we wanted.

But surely, one is tempted to reply, it is much more valuable to have a true belief that is caused by a reliable process, if only because that means that you "have" such a process. If you came to believe the truth accidentally, then for all we know you might not have any reliable processes. Zagzebski explicitly acknowledges the value of having reliable belief-producing processes. However, she argues that this does not save reliabilism.

Zagzebski acknowledges that having true beliefs is valuable and that having a reliable belief-forming mechanism is valuable. But she denies that having a true belief *as the result of* a reliable belief-forming process adds any value to the situation of someone who already has a true belief and already possesses the reliable process. Remember that, according to VP, knowledge is *always* more valuable than accidentally true belief. Zagzebski's point here is that a reliably-formed belief will not necessarily *always* be more valuable than that same belief produced by an unreliable process.

The foregoing discussion is likely to prove confusing if one is trying to distinguish what, exactly, *possesses* the value being considered. The object of scrutiny has a disturbing tendency to shift around. I have mentioned thus far the value of particular *beliefs*, the value of *knowledge*, and the value of "*the knowing state*." These clearly do not all refer to the same thing. So which are we to take as our preferred referent for the purpose at hand: determining whether reliabilism can be reconciled with VP and CI?

Jones appears to be talking straightforwardly about the value of *beliefs*, some of which are produced by reliable processes, and others of which are not. Zagzebski is more ambiguous.

Some passages strongly suggest that she, like Jones, assumes the object of value to be the belief. (The passage about the espresso machine is a good example.) Other passages suggest that she takes some broader state of affairs, “the knowing state,” to be the object of value. So which are we to choose? This question is neither trivial nor restricted in scope to Zagzebski’s work. Few, if any, epistemologists clearly distinguish among these different objects of evaluation. And the list I provide above is by no means exhaustive of the various things philosophers have referred to in discussing the value of knowledge. If, as seems likely, the value of some of these things is independent of the value of the others, this raises serious obstacles to determining whether knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. We first would have to distinguish these different referents and determine which one (or combination) of them is actually relevant to our question. Is one *belief* more valuable than another? Or is it the “*knowing state*?” Is the “knowing state” anything more than the “state of believing something true” plus the “state of being justified?” Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, until this issue is clarified, it will continue to be difficult to determine the commitments of any given theory of knowledge regarding the value of knowledge.

To return to the question at hand, what item is Zagzebski taking to be the object of value here? There are several reasons for interpreting Zagzebski as taking the object of value to be the belief, just as Jones and Kvanvig do, but the primary reason is that she rather clearly takes the belief interpretation in her (more recent) article, whereas she is more ambiguous in her earlier book. In light of this, I will take the article to provide the better account of her current views.

**Kvanvig**

Let us now turn to Kvanvig's somewhat more abstract argument against reliabilism's ability to account for the value of knowledge. One interesting difference between Kvanvig's paper and the others' is that Kvanvig is considerably more skeptical about the ability of any view to account for the value of knowledge. While he doesn't actually deny that such an account can be given, he raises a number of powerful objections that any such account must overcome. He does, however, unequivocally deny that an "instrumentalist" theory of justification can account for any extra value of knowledge over accidentally true beliefs. Kvanvig does not use the term "instrumentalist," but he characterizes the set of views he is criticizing as those that attribute the value of justification<sup>9</sup> to its utility in the production of true beliefs. This is virtually identical to what Jones refers to as instrumentalism, so I will continue to use Jones's term.

For Jones and Kvanvig the issue at stake is the value of a *belief* that is an instance of knowledge vs. the value of a *belief* that is not such an instance. Their focus on instrumentalism and the instrumental value of reliability reflects this concern. This is especially clear in their discussions of means and ends. Each assumes that acquiring true beliefs is the sole epistemic goal or end for instrumentalist views like reliabilism. Being produced by a reliable process is valuable only as a means to that end.

Kvanvig, however, adds an interesting wrinkle to the discussion of instrumentalist theories of justification. He distinguishes between what he calls "intentional means" and "effective means." Intentional means are actions or states of affairs that we have the power to bring about and that we perform with the intention of reaching a particular end. But intentional

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<sup>9</sup> Gettier problems are beside the present point, so "justification" here can be considered as the set of properties that turns true belief into knowledge. Thus, whatever there is to knowledge that makes it more valuable than mere true belief must be included in one's account of justification.

means do not necessarily bring about the end toward which they are directed. For example, a ten-year-old might jump off the roof flapping his arms, intending to fly. This constitutes an intentional means. It is something within his power to bring about (the jumping and flapping) and he intends to accomplish something further thereby (the flying). Obviously and painfully, though, this is not a means that is likely to achieve its end.

This brings us to effective means. Effective means are, by definition, actions or states of affairs that do reliably produce the ends toward which they are directed. Such means need not be within our power to accomplish, nor are they necessarily within our ken. For example, an effective means to unassisted flight is probably not available to human beings. By contrast, an effective means to, say, cold fusion may in fact be available to human beings, though we do not yet know of it.

Kvanvig points out that one may appeal to either sort of means in one's instrumental account of the value of justification. The reliable processes of simple reliabilism are clear examples of *effective* means to the end of having true beliefs. But it would appear that such processes are not *intentional* means. Simple reliabilism does not require that one intends anything in particular when a reliable process produces a belief. One might not even be aware of most of one's reliable processes, and one might be powerless to instigate such a process of one's own volition. Thus, neither condition of intentional means is met by these reliable processes.

So, it looks as though reliabilism accounts for the value of knowledge by counting a belief's justification (being produced by a reliable process) as an *effective* means to the end of having true beliefs. Since the end is valuable, any means that reliably brings about such an end will be valuable. But now we have come full circle back to the question posed by Jones and

Zagzebski. If a belief is true, why bother requiring *in addition* that it be produced by an effective means? Kvanvig has his own diagnosis:

These points yield a lesson for those who wish to defend the importance of justification by appealing to the distinction between means and ends .... The very first question such an approach must be able to answer is why the distinction between means and ends is introduced in the first place. The only adequate response must appeal in some way to the mediacy of the goal and the immediacy of the means, ... to our inability always to tell immediately and directly whether the goal has been achieved in the arena of belief. Yet, if only effective means count as means, this answer is unavailable.<sup>10</sup>

Why does Kvanvig conclude that the strategy he outlines in the cited passage is unavailable to the effective-means theorist? Because any means that would be genuinely effective at bringing about true beliefs will not be something whose effectiveness we can “immediately and directly” discern. The only way we could establish, for example, that some particular process is reliable would be to check how often the beliefs it produces are correct. But, if we could tell by inspection whether or not our beliefs were true, we’d have no more need to discern between reliable and unreliable belief-producing processes.

Kvanvig’s moral is the same as those drawn by Jones and Zagzebski. The fact that a true belief is produced by some means that is generally reliable does not, by itself, make that true belief more valuable. In the absence of any sign or criterion discernable by us that indicates which means are effective and which are not, the mere fact that our true belief was produced by such a means seems irrelevant to anything of value to us.

### **Assumptions**

It is easy now to see that each of these three arguments rests on the two assumptions cited at the outset of this paper. The “belief assumption” is the assumption that the sole source

of the value of knowledge (according to reliabilism) is the value of the belief itself. Thus, if being produced by a reliable process adds no value to the *belief* (over and above the value it has by virtue of being true), then it adds no value to having knowledge. Each of the three critics discussed argues that being produced by a reliable process adds no value to the belief itself, and with this I agree. And each critic also takes this to be sufficient to show that reliabilism cannot meet VP. But this is sufficient only if it is assumed that, in meeting the reliabilist criteria of knowledge, value is not gained from any source other than the belief known. If there is any other source of value for reliably held true beliefs, then the criticisms have failed to show that reliabilism cannot account for the value of knowledge over true belief.

The criticisms depend on “the instrumentalist assumption” as well. They presuppose that the only source of value available to the reliabilist is the instrumental value of reliable processes, which entirely derives from the value of having true beliefs. They consider no other possible sources of value for reliable belief production. Suppose that, in meeting the reliabilist criteria of knowledge, a belief may thereby gain some property that is valuable, yet whose value did not derive from the instrumental value of the reliable process. Then the arguments of the critics fail to establish their point. So, an effective attack on reliabilism as incapable of accounting for the value of knowledge must rule out any such possibilities. Jones, Kvanvig, and Zagzebski all take their arguments to be decisive, yet none considers such possibilities, so it is reasonable to conclude that they assume no such possibilities exist.

It is important to see that *both* assumptions are needed for their arguments to succeed. Their shared strategy is to show that the instrumental value of a reliable process does not make

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<sup>10</sup> Kvanvig, 12.

its product (a true belief) more valuable. Yet if either of the two assumptions is rejected, this strategy fails. The denial of either assumption opens the way for an alternative source of value for reliabilist knowledge that survives these criticisms.

### **3. A New Kind of Value for Reliabilism**

Whence, then, this extra value? Reliabilist views have always been considered good at screening off accidentally true beliefs from the realm of knowledge. Intuitively, then, what makes a reliably produced true belief more valuable than its accidentally true counterpart is precisely this lack of accidentality. What our three critics have shown is that one cannot capture this value in terms of the instrumental value of the reliable process being “passed on” to the belief itself. I will argue that by denying the two assumptions on which the critics’ arguments rest, one can provide an account of the value of non-accidentality that even a reliabilist may embrace. Furthermore, once the source of this value is clear, several interesting points about the nature of knowledge are discernible.

Here is a sketch of the argument that follows:

1. Producing something good non-accidentally is more valuable than producing the same thing accidentally.
2. Producing something good by means of a reliable process is one way of producing something good non-accidentally. (In other words, every instance of the former is an instance of the latter, but not necessarily vice versa.)
3. Therefore, producing something good by means of a reliable process is more valuable than producing the same thing accidentally.

I will argue for each of the premises in turn.

#### **Value is No Accident**

Let me ease into my argument with an analogy. Imagine two world-class athletes, each of whom has Olympic aspirations. Maude actually qualifies and goes to the Olympics. Martin qualifies but misses his event due to food poisoning he contracts from a five-star restaurant ordinarily noted for its fine (and safe) cuisine. Maude goes on to win a gold medal in her event. Martin, strangely enough, later comes into possession of a genuine Olympic gold medal as well. In his case, though, he found it while taking a stroll through the woods near his house, probably lamenting his previous ill fortune.

Now let us suppose for the sake of the example that Maude and Martin are equal in their athletic prowess. We may even assume that, had Martin competed in his event, he too would have won a gold medal. Furthermore, each of them possesses a genuine Olympic gold medal. In both of these respects, the two athletes are in value-equivalent circumstances. If the only factors relevant to the value of possessing the gold medal were the value of the medal itself and the value of athletic ability, then we would be forced to say that Martin's possessing an Olympic gold medal embodies or expresses precisely the same degree of value or goodness that Maude's possessing her medal does. But, intuitively, this judgment is mistaken. Maude's possession of a gold medal is more valuable than Martin's. Thus, this additional value must be due to something other than the value of possessing the medal or the value of having outstanding athletic abilities.

The obvious reason that we value being in Maude's situation more than being in Martin's is that in Maude's case it is *no accident* that she ends up in possession of an Olympic gold medal, whereas in Martin's case it is. If this is correct, then the production of the good (possession of the gold medal) in a non-accidental way is more valuable than its accidental production, but not because the object produced or the agent producing it is more valuable than

the other in some way. The mere fact that the production of the good is non-accidental in Maude's case seems to add value to her situation.

As I have argued elsewhere<sup>11</sup>, the term “accidental” and its cognates are confusingly and multiply ambiguous. When I inadvertently knock over your lamp, breaking it, I apologize and assure you that “it was an accident.” I am letting you know that I had no prior *intention* of knocking over and breaking your lamp. While I think that this kind of accidentality can undermine knowledge as well, it is not the kind of accidentality that reliabilism is especially good at precluding. The example of the two Olympic contenders illustrates the kind of accidentality I have in mind, though perhaps another example would help clarify the concept.

Consider a 10-year-old child shooting pool for the first time. She doesn't know how to hold the cue properly, how to line up a shot properly, etc. Nevertheless, she manages to sink the ball she was aiming into the pocket she intended. This happens, of course, only by the sheerest chance. Given a hundred chances to make a similar shot, she would make not even one. So she produced the good she intended, but only out of the most outrageous good luck. In other words, her making the shot was almost purely accidental. (I say “almost” because she did *intend* to make the shot, so it was not accidental in that sense of the term.)

This is precisely the kind of accidentality that reliabilism is addressed to. What makes the child's shot lucky or accidental is that the end or good produced (putting the 9-ball, say, in the left corner pocket) was not brought about by any skill or ability the child has. If a skilled pool player attempted and made the same shot, we would assume that it was *no accident*—the

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<sup>11</sup> Wayne D. Riggs, “What Are the ‘Chances’ of Being Justified?” *The Monist* 81 (1998).

ball went in because the pool player has the skills and abilities to make that happen, unlike the child.

This example is similar in relevant respects to the gold medal example, and bringing about the desired end in a non-accidental way is intuitively more valuable to us. We would rather come to possess a gold medal the way Maude does and make the pool shot the way the skilled player does. And though in this example the skilled player has abilities the child lacks, this alone does not explain the value-discrepancy. Even pool sharps can miscue, yet by luck make the shot anyway. Such an event is value-equivalent to the child's making a shot.

To cash out these analogies from the realm of action to that of belief, possessing the gold medal and sinking the pool ball are analogous to possessing a true belief. Possessing a true belief only accidentally (a lucky guess) is analogous to Martin's and the child's situations, whereas possessing knowledge of that true belief is analogous to Maude's and the skilled player's situations. What makes the latter's situations, and having knowledge, more valuable than their alternatives is precisely that the good produced in each case is not produced *by accident*. One of the very few items of widespread agreement among philosophers is that if one acquires a true belief in a way that is too much dependent upon "chance" or "luck"—in other words, if it is too "accidental"—one's true belief cannot count as knowledge.

But why should this be? Why are we so interested in whether a good is produced accidentally or not? The epistemological dogma that knowledge entails a lack of accidentality has been left largely unquestioned by epistemologists. Presumably, philosophers have long thought that this judgment simply encapsulates a feature of knowledge that is universally acknowledged, and so stands in no need of explanation or defense. It also may seem as though our intuitions

about particular cases of knowledge or mere true belief are at conceptual rock bottom. That is often the way these intuitions are treated. Epistemologists tend to treat these intuitions as the largely unrevisable “data” with which our theories have to accord.

So, one could stop here and rest one’s case for the value-superiority of producing goods non-accidentally on the force of these examples and on longstanding philosophical tradition. There are two reasons not to take this rather sanguine course. First is the existence of a general objection to the claim that non-accidentalness alone adds value to the possession of true beliefs. The second reason to look more closely at the value of non-accidentalness is that there is a deeper reason why we value it as we do. By illuminating this value substratum, we can explain our intuitions about particular cases of knowing and non-knowing. I shall discuss the first of these reasons next, but the second must be postponed until the concluding section.

It appears that the critic of reliabilism could say at this point that, though being sufficiently non-accidental is a necessary condition for knowledge, mere “non-accidentalness” does not add any value to one’s cognitive situation. After all, not every component of knowledge need have value of its own. Non-accidentalness could be a necessary, but not independently valuable, requirement for knowledge. If this were true, one could acknowledge the importance of non-accidentalness to knowledge, yet avoid the necessity of determining why such a feature is valuable to us.

Zagzebski offers something like this response when considering the widespread appeal of reliabilist-type theories of knowledge. She claims that the popularity of these views stems from a misunderstanding of the significance of Gettier problems.

Gettier cases are in a genre of counterexamples that illustrate what is wrong with a definition by taking extreme cases. In these cases the truth is reached accidentally, and that is sufficient to preclude their being instances of knowledge. But it is a mistake to conclude from *that* that anything short of accidentality is good enough. Of course a belief must be non-accidentally true in order to be an instance of knowledge, but that is only the weakest thing we can say about it. Accidentality is epistemically bad, but it does not follow that non-accidentality in any degree or form is epistemically good. [9]<sup>12</sup>

I find nothing with which to disagree in this passage, but Zagzebski's claims do not take her as far as she thinks they do. I agree that not just any degree of non-accidentality is sufficient to render a true belief an instance of knowledge. I also agree that non-accidentality in any degree or form is not necessarily epistemically good. However, my view is not committed to the positions these claims reject. Every true belief we hold is, to some extent, accidental. We *might* have been run over by a car on the way to work, and then we would never have had the (true) belief that whoever made the coffee this morning didn't know what he was doing. Since such things are not entirely under our control, to some extent it was only our good fortune (i.e., an accident) that we were not run over before forming the true belief.

The foregoing example shows that not just any old degree of accidentality is enough to undermine a knowledge-claim. Assuming everything about my belief is in good epistemic order, the mere fact that I was (fortunately) not run over by a car on the way to work does not keep me from knowing that the maker of this morning's coffee was incompetent. Another point suggested by the example, and reinforced by brief reflection, is that accidentality is a matter of degree. Any event can be more or less accidental. The degree to which we judge something to be accidental

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<sup>12</sup> Zagzebski (1998), 9.

seems to depend upon to what extent we were causally efficacious in bringing about that event; and causal efficacy is clearly something that comes in degrees.

A potentially confusing ambiguity threatens in the above paragraph, so let me address it immediately. The degree of accidentality of some event E is inversely proportional to the degree of causal efficacy the person in question has in bringing about E. What is it for a *person* to be causally efficacious? To be sure, it is not merely for one's body to figure in the "causal chain" of events preceding E. For a *person* to be causally efficacious in bringing about some event, the event must be *sufficiently causally determined* by the abilities, powers, skills, etc. of the person herself. So, to return to the example with which I began this section, Maude is to a greater degree than Martin causally responsible for her possession of an Olympic gold medal. Martin did not come by his medal in a way that was as causally effected by the application of his own abilities, powers, or skills, but rather by pure luck.

Since human beings have only limited causal powers, we rarely if ever bring about some event by the application of our own abilities, powers and skills *alone*. (Perhaps some mental events are exceptions to this.) Thus, the occurrence of (nearly) any event brought about in part by human agency is to some degree accidental. This includes the events of coming to hold and continuing to hold a true belief. So, assuming we do know even a fraction of the things we take ourselves to know, knowledge cannot require a complete lack of accidentality. This means that either some degree or some type of accidentality must be allowable in instances of knowledge.

Let us return, now, to Zagzebski's argument that non-accidentality is not a source of added value for true beliefs. She is right to say that not just any degree of non-accidentality is good enough for knowledge, and it is true that not every kind of non-accidentality is necessarily

epistemically good. If some kinds of accidentality are permissible in instances of knowledge, then the absence of such accidentality might well be epistemically neutral, rather than epistemically good. So Zagzebski is right that neither of these claims *follows from* the acceptance of non-accidentality as a necessary condition of knowledge. But neither does her argument show that non-accidentality is *precluded from* adding value to true belief. She merely undermines one potential argument for thinking that non-accidentality is epistemically valuable. Therefore, a defender of reliabilism need only offer a different argument for the added value of non-accidentality to avoid this maneuver. That is the task of the next section.

### **Credit Where Credit is Due**

Bringing about some good end in a non-accidental way is more valuable than doing so accidentally, because one deserves more *credit* in the former case than in the latter. This is what explains our intuitions about lucky guesses and gold medals alike. A person who is causally efficacious in bringing about some positively valuable outcome is “due” some amount of credit for having done so. Alternatively, a person who is causally involved in the production of a positively valuable outcome, but is so only accidentally (to too great a degree), does not deserve the same degree of credit. This is a much more familiar phenomenon in the realm of action, which is why I began with examples having to do with actions rather than beliefs. When we see the skilled pool player sink a shot, we give him credit for making a good shot. When the child makes a similar shot by pure luck, we do not give her the same credit.

This is even more clear when the outcome in question has a moral dimension. Someone who produces some morally good end by pure luck deserves less moral credit than does someone who produces the end by application of her skills and abilities. These kinds of considerations are

what lie behind our intuitions about cases of “moral luck.” The drunk driver who fails to run over someone only because she encountered no pedestrians on the way home deserves little or no credit for that positive outcome (or lack of a negative outcome) because this outcome was not (sufficiently) brought about by the application of her abilities, powers, and skills, but rather due to chance alone (the lack of pedestrians).

By analogy, we value coming to hold a true belief in a (sufficiently) non-accidental way because we get more *epistemic credit* for the true belief than we would have had we gotten it right accidentally. Furthermore, producing a good end by a reliable process is one way to produce that end non-accidentally. Given my account of what it takes for a person to be causally efficacious, it follows that any time an outcome is sufficiently determined by one’s skills, abilities, etc.—in other words, anytime one produces the outcome via a reliable process—it will also be non-accidental to that degree.

#### **4. Conclusion**

If this account is correct, then possessing a non-accidentally true belief is of more value than possessing an only accidentally true belief, because in the former case one generates a certain amount of “epistemic credit” for oneself that one does not in the latter case. Consider any of the standard cases of accidentally true belief (e.g., one guesses correctly that the 9-digit number on the chalkboard is prime). Why are we unwilling to say that in these cases one has knowledge? A typical response to such a case is “Of course she doesn’t know that p! She just happened to be right!” There is a subtle point in this exclamation that is easily missed. The objection expressed is not that in such a case the person *has no knowledge*. It is that the person *does not know*.

This is significant because it removes the focus from the belief alone to the overall state of “knowing that  $p$ .” It’s the difference between ascribing the status of “knowledge” to a belief and ascribing the status of “knower” (or perhaps just the ascription of being in a “knowing state”) to the believer. Once this shift is made, it is easy to deny the two assumptions that are crucial to the critics’ arguments. The value added by the non-accidentality of a true belief is value that is added to the achievement of the person. When a true belief is achieved non-accidentally, the person deserves epistemic credit for this that she would not be due had she only accidentally happened upon a true belief. This extra value is neither instrumentally derived from the value of having true beliefs, nor is it a value that accrues to the belief itself. Thus, this account is possible only by denying the instrumentalist and belief assumptions.

Where does this leave us? I have argued against Jones, Kvanvig and Zagzebski that reliabilism can explain at least some of the value of having knowledge rather than mere accidental true belief. Being in the state of “knowing that  $p$ ” entails of a person that she have a true belief for which she deserves a certain degree of epistemic credit. Believing something true by accident entails no credit of any sort to the person. This is so despite the fact that the belief is no more valuable in the former case than the latter, nor need we assume that the believers in question differ in their respective epistemic qualities. The difference that makes a *value* difference here is the variation in the degree to which a person’s abilities, powers, and skills are causally responsible for the outcome, believing truly that  $p$ .

This shift in evaluative focus from the beliefs of agents to the agents themselves has become something of a movement in current epistemology, as witnessed by the recent interest in

so-called "virtue theories."<sup>13</sup> My purpose here has been to show that reliabilism can account for (some of) the value of knowledge, but only if it makes just this shift in focus to epistemic agents. Thus, for example, Ernest Sosa's "virtue reliabilism" has the resources to explain (at least some of) the value of knowledge.

We value this credit for just the same reasons we value being able to take credit for all manner of good outcomes of our actions. It is good to produce something of value, even accidentally. How much better it is when it is to our credit that the outcome was produced. There is a sense in which the value of the good outcome somehow accrues to us when it is produced non-accidentally. Let me be clear about this: I am not talking about the esteem one might receive from one's friends and fans for producing something of value. The value of deserving epistemic credit, or any other kind, is independent of whether such credit is ever acknowledged by anyone besides ourselves.

I will now consider one final objection.<sup>14</sup> Why should we think that this value I describe (the value of epistemic credit) is the kind of value traditionally associated with knowledge? After all, reliabilism is often attacked for allowing beliefs to count as knowledge whose provenance we are completely unaware of. If we do not know how our belief was formed, then we clearly cannot know that it was formed by a reliable process. How can a view that allows such a thing capture the traditional value of knowledge?

My first response is to backpedal, and remind the reader that I acknowledged at the beginning of this paper that I am not trying to account for *all* the value of knowledge. I am

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective*, Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, Greco, ???, Hookway, ???. Others who are willing to be considered virtue theorists include Goldman and Plantinga.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.

denying the claim that reliabilism can account for *none* of the value of knowledge. I fully agree that some kind of internalist criterion is necessary to capture the full value traditionally accorded knowledge (if it can be done at all!). However, I think that there is a more positive reason to accept epistemic credit as part of the traditional package of the value of knowledge. It rests on the assumption that at least some part of the traditional value of knowledge is derived from one's *achievement* in coming to possess it.

No matter how hard you try, or how epistemically virtuous you are, if you arrive at a true belief in some way that is not (sufficiently) due to your epistemic abilities, you have *achieved* nothing. Something nice has happened to you, but it is not something that you have brought about or deserve credit for. Only when you deserve credit for some outcome does the outcome count as an *achievement* of yours. Moreover, the more credit you deserve for some outcome, the greater the extent to which it is an achievement *of yours*. Indeed, to say that you deserve (a lot of) credit for something is tantamount to saying that it is something you have achieved. Thus, it appears that if knowledge is valuable at least in part because it is an achievement, the added value comes in the form of the epistemic credit one is due. And finally, if having knowledge does not entail deserving some degree of epistemic credit, then the tradition of reverence and admiration for those whom we take to be knowledgeable makes little sense.

These results have interesting consequences for theories of knowledge. In the first place, it looks as though to give an account of knowledge we are going to have to look carefully at the more general problem of when we deserve credit for a good outcome. I have not claimed to have provided anything like a definition or analysis of knowledge, but if it is true that we value knowledge, at least in part, because we deserve credit for arriving at a true belief non-accidentally,

then it becomes a constraint on any adequate theory of knowledge to account for this value.

There are also interesting suggestions that the problem of accounting for the value of knowledge and the problem of moral luck are conceptually intertwined. Each raises the issue of what degree of credit we are due when the outcome in question is due, to a large degree, to chance.

Addressing these issues requires the aforementioned shift from a focus on evaluating the belief itself to a focus on the broader “knowing state.” This is a state that a *person* is in only when she is causally responsible for believing something true. Therefore, rather than talking about the value of *knowledge*, I would prefer to talk about the value of *knowing*. I’m not even sure that there is any such thing as an item of “knowledge.” I cannot think of any intrinsic property of a known belief that is not also a property of an accidentally true belief. Beliefs can be true or false, interesting or dull, simple or complicated. But none of these distinguish knowledge from accidentally true belief. The difference is a matter of the relation between the knower and the belief, not of the properties of the belief *per se*.

If all of this fails to convince, I have one final question. If the account I have proposed does not explain (at least part of) the value of knowledge, what does? What makes any one particular instance of knowledge more valuable than its correlative accidental belief? It cannot be the instrumental value of a reliable process, as our critics have shown. It cannot be the epistemically laudable characteristics of the believer, because one could have those same characteristics, yet in a particular case slip up and believe something foolishly that happens to be true.

Perhaps it is the reasons for which one holds the belief. Having well-supported beliefs might be more valuable than poorly-supported ones. But is this really plausible? Keeping

ourselves firmly fixed on the single case, why should we care whether one of our true beliefs is *also* well-supported? If the belief is, by hypothesis, true, what value is added by the doxastic support of other beliefs?<sup>15</sup> In the end, I think no property of the belief itself is going to be found that enhances *its* own value. Perhaps if beliefs came with their truth or falsity marked plainly on them, *this* property would add value to the belief, but of course they do not.

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<sup>15</sup> See also Kvanvig.