



Action, Knowledge, and Will

John Hyman

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198735779.001.0001>

Published: 2015

Online ISBN: 9780191799754

Print ISBN: 9780198735779

Search in this book

CHAPTER

8 The Road to Larissa

John Hyman

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198735779.003.0008> Pages 191–210

Published: May 2015

Abstract

As Plato explains in the *Meno*, once we distinguish between knowing a fact and merely having the right opinion, it becomes hard to explain why we value knowledge. The advantage of knowledge over ignorance about some matter that concerns us is obvious. For example, the traveller who knows which road leads to Larissa is more likely to get there than the one who does not. But it is harder to explain the advantage of knowing that something is the case over having the true belief that it is the case, because believing something and knowing it tend to produce the same behaviour. This chapter proposes a solution to this problem based on the theory of knowledge defended in Chapter 7.

Keywords: Plato, *Meno*, value, knowledge, ignorance, belief

Subject: Metaphysics

Collection: Oxford Scholarship Online

8.1 The tree of knowledge

O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,
Mother of science, now I feel thy power
Within me clear not only to discern
Things in their causes but to trace the ways
Of highest agents deemed however wise.

These are the opening lines of the serpent's eulogy of knowledge in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, the speech that persuades Eve to eat the fruit from the 'wisdom-giving plant'. Milton composed his poem during the years the Royal Society was founded. He understood and admired the power and beauty of modern science, and

saw as clearly as anyone had done before the problem with the orthodox interpretation of the story of the Fall. Knowledge is good for human beings, and, as the serpent says to Eve, 'God, therefore, cannot hurt ye and be just.'

The story is traditionally called the Fall of Man, or simply the Fall, but does the name reflect how it was understood by the community in which it was first told and written down? Daube thought not. He said that it should be called the Rise: 'It is only if we read [Genesis 3] through late Jewish rabbinical and Christian spectacles that it is about a fall.'¹ As I shall explain, I think the case for this view is compelling. But let us first recall the orthodox interpretation.

In the Christian tradition, both the name and the interpretation were made canonical by Augustine's commentary in *The City of God*.² We are told in the last verse of Genesis 2 that before they ate the knowledge-giving fruit, Adam and Eve were 'naked and not ashamed'. According to Augustine, their nakedness was not shameful because 'not yet did lust move those members [the genitals] without the will's consent'.³

p. 192 The devil, a fallen angel, envious of man's innocent and unfallen state, chose the serpent to 'insinuate his persuasive guile into the mind of man' because 'being slippery, and moving in tortuous windings, it was suitable for his purpose'. The serpent, Augustine says, 'first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance', judging that the man might be more susceptible to persuasion by the woman than by himself. God had told Adam he would die if he ate the fruit, but Eve was persuaded by the serpent that the threat was empty, and that if she ate the fruit she would herself become like a god. Adam was not persuaded, but he yielded to Eve, 'the husband to the wife, the one human being to the only other human being'.

Thus Eve was deceived, but Adam, Augustine says, 'sinned with his eyes open'. 'Although they were not both deceived by credulity, yet both were entangled in the snares of the devil and taken by sin.' What sin did Adam and Eve commit? It was the sin of pride. 'The evil act had never been done', Augustine says, 'had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation?' The immediate result of their sin was that their eyes were opened, they saw they were naked, they were ashamed, and they covered the shameful parts of their bodies with fig-leaves.

Augustine acknowledges that it may not be immediately obvious to everyone who hears the story that Adam and Eve committed an act of great wickedness. But he insists that we should not think that the sin was a small and light one merely because it was committed about food. On the contrary, he explains, 'obedience is the mother and guardian of all the virtues', and preferring to fulfil one's own will instead of the Creator's 'is destruction'.

Adam and Eve, Augustine says, 'despised the authority of God', and God's punishment was that man would henceforth live 'in a hard and miserable bondage', since he had chosen obedience to his own will rather than to God's, 'doomed in spite of himself to die in body as he had willingly become dead in spirit, condemned even to eternal death (had not the grace of God delivered him) because he had forsaken eternal life'.

Augustine summarizes his interpretation of the story as follows: '[Adam and Eve] committed so great a sin, that by it human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death.'

p. 193 This is the orthodox interpretation of the story in the Christian tradition, and the canonical interpretation in the Roman Catholic Church. The interpretation in the Jewish tradition has been similar since the rabbinic period—in other words, for the last two thousand years.

Daube's remarks about the story of the Fall occur in his lectures *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, Adam and Eve, he explains, being 'probably [among] the earliest heroes of civil disobedience'. Daube compares the story with the Greek myth of Prometheus. There, Zeus, the King of the Olympians, is determined to

withhold from man the basic material for civilization, namely fire, but Prometheus, a being halfway between the gods and the earth-dwellers, steals fire from heaven and delivers it to man. 'Zeus cannot undo what has been done; he can only inflict dire punishment on the two conspirators, Prometheus and man.'⁴

The myth, Daube says, reflects an archaic phase in theology when man looks on the gods as being opposed to him. 'Nor can one be surprised that there should have been such a phase seeing that, before the advent of even primitive technology, it must have been very natural for man to feel himself in the midst of a largely inimical set-up.' Any gains, he adds, were to be attained in defiance of the dominant forces around him.

In the Bible, one of the chapters representing this stage is the so-called story of the Fall [...] Stripped of subsequent interpretation, the narrative reports that Adam and Eve were in a garden, living crudely and mindlessly like the animals surrounding them. 'They were naked and not ashamed'—this, from the wisdom narrator's point of view, was not a blissful Rousseauesque state but a horrible primitivity. However, there was a tree in the garden with knowledge-giving fruit. Only God forbade the couple to eat of it, and he made sure his prohibition would be heeded by threatening them with immediate death if they disobeyed: 'On the day that you eat thereof, you shall assuredly die.' A being half-way between God and man, the serpent, informs them that this threat is empty: the fruit is not death-bringing, not fatal, on the contrary it will open their eyes and make them discerning. So they do eat of it, and indeed God turns out to have been lying. They do not die, and their eyes are opened exactly as the serpent, the Prometheus of the Biblical story, told them. They become discriminating between good and evil, aware of their nakedness—capable of shame.⁵

'Just like Zeus,' Daube concludes, 'God inflicts fearful retribution on the rebellious serpent and couple, but like Zeus, he must put up with the start of human civilization.'

p. 194 Perhaps the suggestion that the story should be called the Rise is an exaggeration. The Hebrew word for fall (*nepilah*) does not occur in the story itself, or in any of the references to it in the Hebrew scriptures. Nor does the story seem to describe a change for the worse in human nature. But it does describe a dramatic change for the worse in the circumstances in which human beings live, and it explains some of the most difficult and painful aspects of human life, as well as the origin of civilization. Nevertheless, Daube's interpretation of the story must be essentially right.

First, as he points out, nakedness was considered shameful by the community in which the story was originally written down. It is extraordinary that commentators continue to miss this point. For example, one recently published commentary on *Genesis* says: '*Genesis* 2 ends in a brief notation about the innocence of the first human couple. Although they were "naked" there was no shame in it.'⁶ But 'there was no shame in it' is not what the verse says. It says, 'And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and not ashamed', which is very different. The great rabbi Rashi, who died eight centuries before the naturalist movement got going, did not make the same mistake. He comments on the verse: 'They were not aware of the *derech tzniut* [the rabbinic laws concerned with modest clothing and conduct], to distinguish between good and bad.'⁷

Furthermore, Augustine's explanation of why Adam's and Eve's nakedness was not shameful is unconvincing. He says, 'not yet did lust move those members without the will's consent.' But there is no evidence for this explanation in the text, and it is difficult to understand why the fact that sexual arousal can be involuntary should make it shameful. The shamefulness of an involuntary reaction (as opposed to shameful conduct) generally depends on its being observed or occurring in an inappropriate situation, as when Odysseus is ashamed to be seen weeping by the Phaeacians, and hides his face in his cloak.

The second consideration that favours Daube's interpretation over Augustine's is that there is no mention in the story of the devil. Satan first appears in Jewish writings in the post-exilic period, about four centuries

after *Genesis* was composed; and there, in *Job* for example, he is clearly subordinate to God and unable to act without His permission. Satan emerges as an independent personality and the personification of evil in the first century CE, and the earliest extant statement in Jewish writings that he was responsible for the Fall is by Rabbi Eliezer, around the year 100.

p. 195 Third, as for the serpent, Augustine says that he is slippery and moves in tortuous windings, but in *Genesis* he is described as *arum*, which means, crafty, shrewd, or cunning. This does not imply that he is wicked or evil, any more than the Greek word *polymetis*, which Homer uses as Odysseus's epithet, means this. What is clear is that the serpent knows that the humans will not die upon eating the forbidden fruit, but will become 'like Gods, knowing good and evil' (*Genesis* 3.5), as God himself acknowledges they have done: 'Behold,' God says, 'the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil' (3.22).

Fourth, the orthodox interpretation of the story ignores God's lie. God says to Adam: '[O]f the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (*Genesis* 2.17). The serpent says: 'Ye shall not surely die' (3.4). And this proves to be true. Ever since Paul, the orthodox interpretation has finessed this point by interpreting 'die' as 'become mortal' or 'become susceptible to eternal death'. But 'die' is not used to mean these things anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. Besides, the creation story does not say that Adam and Eve were created immortal, despite Augustine's claim that they forsook eternal life. On the contrary, it implies that they were created mortal, for God expels Adam from the Garden of Eden to ensure that he will not *become* immortal by eating from the tree of life (3.22–23).⁸

Fifth, it cannot have been wicked or sinful on the part of Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, because when they ate the fruit they did not yet know the difference between good and evil. It is true that they knew they were disobeying God. The story implies that this is something one can know without yet understanding evil, wickedness, or sin, and no doubt this is correct. But disobedience in a state of moral innocence or ignorance, even deliberate disobedience—for example, by young children—is not evil, wicked, or sinful, regardless of whom one disobeys.

Sixth, knowledge in general, and knowledge of good and evil in particular, are good for human beings. This has always been acknowledged as a powerful reason to reject the story in its orthodox interpretation, or to deny that God's commandment not to eat the fruit was just. In *Paradise Lost*, the serpent explains the point when he advocates disobedience to Eve with consummate forensic skill. But the earliest anti-Christian polemicists were already aware of it. In *Against the Galileans*, Julian 'the Apostate' writes:

p. 196 | Is it not excessively strange that God should deny to the human beings whom he had fashioned the power to distinguish between good and evil? What could be more foolish than a being unable to distinguish good from bad? For it is evident that he would not avoid the latter, I mean things evil, nor would he strive after the former, I mean things good. And, in short, God refused to let man taste of wisdom, than which there could be nothing of more value for man. For that the power to distinguish between good and less good is the property of wisdom is evident surely even to the witless; so that the serpent was a benefactor rather than a destroyer of the human race.⁹

For all these reasons, Daube's interpretation of the story must be essentially correct. It is not a story of human sin and just punishment by a just god; it is a story of a deceitful god who is jealous of human progress and visits the most terrible retribution on the man and woman who take the first perilous and defiant step towards civilized human life.

Daube comments that although the story pits man against God, it is presumably modelled on precedents involving struggles of man against man, and indicates familiarity with a situation where a potentate can only with difficulty be got to concede a minimum of independent life to his subjects. He adds: 'There may be

a reminiscence, too, of a helpful role of persons who, while connected with the ruler, side with the oppressed—and pay the price.¹⁰ This is surely plausible, but what is certain is that the story is the earliest affirmation in our culture of the value of knowledge for human beings, and its indispensable place in human life.

8.2 The *Meno* puzzle

Several centuries after *Genesis* was written down, Plato presented the following puzzle about knowledge in the *Meno*:

Socrates: If a man knew the way to Larissa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not be a good guide?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And a person who had the right opinion as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might also be a good guide, might he not?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And presumably as long as he has the right opinion, he will be just as good a guide as the one who knows—if he believes the truth instead of knowing it.

↳

Meno: Just as good.

Socrates: Hence true opinion is as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is. (*Meno* 97a–c)

p. 197

The puzzle is this. Knowledge is not the same thing as true belief. For example, no one can know now which team will win the next World Cup. But across the world there are people who fervently believe their team will win, and some of them will turn out to be right. They will not turn out to have *known* which team would win, but to have had the right opinion. (One can say ‘I *knew* it!’ meaning ‘I was certain!’ or ‘I was right!’) So knowing has to be distinguished from having the right opinion, that is, believing something that happens to be true. But while the superiority of knowledge over ignorance—which the author of *Genesis* took for granted—is not hard to explain, it is hard to explain why knowledge is superior to true belief. True belief seems to be as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is, since the one who knows the truth and the one who merely believes the truth will pursue the same course of action, or offer the same advice. So why does it matter what we know?

I shall argue that Plato’s own solution to the puzzle fails, but that it can be solved if we accept the theory of knowledge defended in Chapter 7.¹¹ However, the solution I envisage steers a path between opposing views about the value of knowledge. For some philosophers claim that we simply value the truth, and it does not matter whether we achieve the peculiar kind of relation to it we call ‘knowing’ it—however exactly that should be defined—as long as we are guided by the truth, while others hold the opposite view. But I maintain that being guided by the truth and being guided by knowledge are one and the same thing, so both of these opposing views are partly right and partly wrong.

Three other preliminary remarks:

(A)

On the one hand, the idea that knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief does not imply that knowledge is always preferable to ignorance, that every fact is worth the expense of learning or remembering it, or that the advance of science has benefits but no costs. On the other hand, if none of these

things is true—as most people believe—it does not follow that knowledge can be worthless, but only that its value is in many cases outweighed by the value of other things, such as survival, or peace of mind.

p. 198 Is some knowledge absolutely worthless? Sosa thinks so:

At the beach on a lazy summer afternoon, we might scoop up a handful of sand and carefully count the grains. This would give us an otherwise unremarked truth, something that on the view before us is at least a positive good, other things equal. This view is hard to take seriously. The number of grains would not interest most of us in the slightest. Absent any such antecedent interest, moreover, it is hard to see any sort of *value* in one's having that truth.¹²

But two points count against this view. First, it is always possible that, at some stage, one will be invited to bet on the number of grains of sand in a handful. It's the kind of thing that can happen on a lazy summer afternoon at the beach. So it would presumably be worth preparing for the eventuality, say, by averaging a thousand carefully conducted trials, if the cost of doing so were nil. And if that counts as having an antecedent interest, then we have an antecedent interest in knowing any fact that can be the subject of a bet, which means any fact that can be known at all. Second, as Horwich points out, the view that all knowledge has some value accords with the conventional idea that a perfect being would be omniscient.¹³ Luke says that God knows the number of hairs on each person's head. Whether it interests Him does not seem to the point.

However, neither of these arguments is conclusive. Regarding the first, perhaps it is always possible that an item of knowledge will prove useful, but the chance of it doing so can be negligible—i.e. so small that it can be ignored—and hence the value of knowing it can be negligible as well. Regarding the second, the idea of a perfect being may be a guide to what we value, but not in the simple way Horwich implies. For it is essentially the idea of a being without limits rather than a being that realizes human values to the highest degree. For example, a perfect being is traditionally held to be omnipresent, but this does not imply that every location has some value. Besides, it is not obvious that the idea of a perfect being, as opposed to the idea of a perfect specimen of some kind of being, makes perfect sense, and if it does not, then it is an imperfect guide to what we value for that reason alone.

The right answer, I suggest, is that the value of knowledge can be negligible. Whether this is closer to Sosa's view or Horwich's is debatable.

(B)

p. 199 I am not concerned, at least directly, with the value of the concept of knowledge, as opposed to the value of knowledge itself. These topics are ↪ not always sharply distinguished, but they are distinct. For there can be a positive value in having a concept of something that is itself of negative value, such as crime or sin, or of no value positive or negative, such as the number π .

(C)

Various questions have been discussed by philosophers under the general heading 'The Value of Knowledge', but I shall focus narrowly on a single question. I shall talk throughout in general terms about the value of knowledge, but this should always be read as referring to the question raised by the passage in the *Meno*: is knowledge a better guide to acting the right way than true belief, and if so why?

8.3 Plato's solution to the puzzle

Here is Plato's own answer. Knowledge, Socrates explains, is more valuable than true belief, because true beliefs are like the statues made by Daedalus, which were so life-like that they ran away unless they were tied down:

So long as they stay with us, [true beliefs] are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one ties them down by working out the cause [*aitias logismō*]. That process, my dear Meno, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. (97e–98a)

The interpretation of this passage is controversial, especially the phrase *aitias logismō*, which I have translated as 'working out the cause'. However, Socrates appears to be saying that what makes a true belief more durable, more stable, is understanding why it is true; and he is certainly claiming that the stability of knowledge is what makes it more valuable than true belief:

Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether. (98a)

In sum, Plato's idea appears to be that knowledge involves *understanding why* the things we know to be true are true; and that understanding this makes us able to hold fast to the truth, and avoid lapsing into falsehood. And that explains why knowledge is more valuable than true belief.¹⁴

p. 200 The solution is ingenious, but it is not convincing, for four main reasons. First, beliefs that do not have a rational foundation are not necessarily ↯ unstable. Some of our most stable beliefs are inculcated in us as children, without being tied down by 'working out the cause'—moral and religious beliefs, for example. The prophets and preachers who offer to guide us on the road to salvation generally tell us that they know the way; but even if they are mistaken, their beliefs tend to be stable, perhaps because the stabilizing effect can be achieved by merely believing that one has 'worked out the cause'.

Second, neither the stability of knowledge, nor its status as knowledge, is invariably due to evidence or rational support. Russell and Whitehead complete their proof of the proposition that $1 + 1 = 2$ on page 86 of *Principia Mathematica*, volume 2, and perhaps this counts as 'working out the cause'. But it is doubtful whether the proof transformed a belief into knowledge, or made it more stable and less liable to 'run away'.

Third, knowledge is not uniformly more stable than belief. Since we are forgetful, we lose a good deal of the knowledge we acquire: trivial knowledge, such as the number of coins I have in my pocket, much of the knowledge we acquire when we read a newspaper, and much of the knowledge we acquire at school. Some philosophers maintain that whether the beliefs we acquire by testimony—for example, when we read the papers—count as knowledge or mere opinion can depend on the reliability of the source. And that may be right. But the reliability of the source—as opposed to what we believe about it—will not normally affect how securely we hold on to these beliefs, or how easily they are forgotten and slip out of our minds.

Fourth, as Craig has pointed out, the stability of a person's beliefs is important in some cases but not others. 'Many beliefs', he writes, 'are required for the guidance of single, "one-off" actions under circumstances that will not recur, and once the particular occasion is past there is no obvious value at all in their persistence.'¹⁵ For instance, it is important for me to have a true belief now about the time I am due to meet a visitor this afternoon, and the time at which I promised to call a friend in Los Angeles tonight. But by next Wednesday, it probably won't matter whether I have retained either of these beliefs. So the idea that stability is what makes knowledge more valuable than mere true belief suggests that it is *not* more valuable in cases where its usefulness is short-lived.

p. 201 For these reasons, Plato's own solution to his problem is unconvincing. And this may make us wonder whether the problem is real. Perhaps the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true belief is an illusion. Perhaps it is part of the mystification of knowledge Wittgenstein criticized in *On Certainty*: '... a queer and extremely important mental state ... a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact.'¹⁶ Perhaps it is a nostalgic tribute to a conception of knowledge—Plato's, Descartes's—we can no longer share.¹⁷

Whatever one may think about these diagnoses, a sceptical attitude to Plato's problem—in other words, the thought that perhaps knowledge is *not* more valuable than true belief—has become quite widespread in the last forty or fifty years, since the publication of Gettier's article 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', for four main reasons.¹⁸

First, Gettier showed that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, from which it follows that knowledge is not necessary for justified true belief. But in that case, why should we care about knowledge? Wright expresses this thought as follows: 'We can live with the concession that we do not, strictly, *know* some of the things we believed ourselves to know, provided we can retain the thought that we are fully justified in accepting them.'¹⁹

Second, if we seek knowledge, and justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge, how can we seek the extra element knowledge requires? We can seek fresh evidence supporting the hypothesis we favour, and test and interrogate the evidence we believe we already have. But we could not seek the elusive ingredient that distinguishes knowledge from justified true belief, even if we could say exactly what it is. Kaplan makes this point as follows: 'All we can do by way of seeking knowledge is seek justified belief and hope that this justified belief will satisfy whatever other conditions a justified belief must satisfy in order to qualify as knowledge.'²⁰ It seems to follow that whatever the difference between knowledge and justified belief may be, scientific research, and rational inquiry in general, can simply ignore it. It *can* ignore it, because it *must*.

Third, many of the analyses of knowledge proposed during the decades that followed the publication of Gettier's article made it difficult to understand why knowledge should be more valuable than true belief.

In some cases it is their sheer complexity. For example, Swain proposed that S knows that *p* if and only if

- (1) *p*,
- (2) S believes that *p*,
- (3) there is a set of reasons, *A*, such that
 - (a) S's belief that *p* is based on *A*,
 - (b) S's believing that *p* on the basis of *A* is justified,
 - (c) \hookrightarrow S has *A* as a result of at least one non-defective causal ancestry,
 - (d) if S has any other reasons, *B*, that are relevant to S's justifiably believing that *p*, then S would be justified in believing that *p* on the basis of $A \cup B$.²¹

p. 202

But if this is what knowledge is, should it matter to us whether our choices are informed by knowledge or by true belief? Should we care whether we take the left fork because we know that it is the road to Larissa, all three conditions being satisfied, or because we merely have a justified true belief that it is the road to Larissa, (3)(d) not being satisfied? It is difficult to see why.

In other cases it is the specific content of the analysis that makes it hard to understand why knowledge matters. For example, Nozick's initial proposal is that S knows that *p* if and only if

- (1) p ,
- (2) S believes that p ,
- (3) if p weren't true S wouldn't believe that p ,
- (4) if p were true in slightly different circumstances, S would believe that p and wouldn't believe that not- p .

In fact this analysis cannot be quite right, as Nozick himself points out.²² But, using the terminology of possible worlds for illustrative purposes, suppose we succeeded in defining sets of worlds W_1 and W_2 that made an analysis of this kind watertight: S knows that p if and only if

- (1) p ,
- (2) S believes that p ,
- (3) in W_1 , if p is false then S doesn't believe that p ,
- (4) in W_2 , if p is true then S believes that p and doesn't believe that not- p .

If this were what knowledge is, it would be hard to see why it is more valuable than true belief. For it is obvious that I want the beliefs I rely on in the actual world, e.g. about which road leads to Larissa, to be true. But why should I mind whether my beliefs in possible but non-actual worlds are true as well? Why should I mind whether the journeys I *could* take to Larissa but *don't* take end in the right place? For all I care, they can take me to Crawford, Texas, or Guantanamo Bay. It might be objected that if I don't know which of several worlds is the actual world, then I shall want the beliefs I rely on in all of them to be true. But this is not quite right. My only concern is that I believe the truth in the actual world, but, being imperfectly informed, there are many respects in which I cannot say which world this is.²³

p. 203 Compare Williamson's suggestion that we value knowledge because it is a state 'whose essence includes a matching between mind and world'.²⁴ A similar objection applies. Why is a mental state that essentially involves a matching between mind and world preferable to one that non-essentially involves a matching between mind and world? Why is the simple fact of a matching between mind and world—i.e. simply being right—not all that counts? Philosophers disagree about whether water is essentially H_2O , or whether water on twin earth might be XYZ, but the properties, and hence the value, of the water we earthlings know and love does not depend on which view is right.

The fourth reason why epistemology since Gettier has encouraged the thought that knowledge may not be more valuable than true belief is that most of the extensive literature addressing Gettier's puzzle about knowledge sought to capture the idea that, if we know the truth, we do not believe the truth fortuitously or by luck. But benefits are not worth any less because they were gained fortuitously or by luck. We may admire a man more for inventing the bagless vacuum cleaner than for winning the lottery, but pound for pound their fortunes are worth the same.²⁵

8.4 An elaboration of Plato's solution

To summarize the main points covered in 8.2 and 8.3:

First, Plato's proposal is that 'once [true beliefs] are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether.' But this is unconvincing for four reasons:

- Beliefs that do not have a rational foundation are not necessarily unstable.
- The stability of knowledge is not invariably due to evidence or rational support.
- Knowledge is not uniformly more stable than belief.
- Whether the stability of someone's belief is of value depends on what the belief is, and the circumstances.

p. 204 Second, Gettier's article 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', and the literature it generated, cast doubt on the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true belief, for four reasons: ↴

- If knowledge is not necessary for justified true belief, justification cannot be the reason why we should value knowledge more.
- We cannot seek knowledge as opposed to justified true belief, so whatever the factor is that distinguishes between them, scientific research or rational enquiry can ignore it.
- Many of the definitions of knowledge devised to deal with Gettier-type cases make it hard to see why knowledge should be more valuable than true belief, either because of their complexity, or because of their specific content.
- Believing the truth fortuitously or by luck does not diminish the advantage it confers.

I shall make one further observation about Gettier. It is implicit in what I have already said about the impact of his article, but it is worth making it explicit. As we have seen, Gettier's article showed that justification cannot be the factor that makes knowledge more valuable than true belief. And this makes the puzzle in the *Meno* more difficult to solve. Ever since Plato, it has been clear that we cannot explain why we seek knowledge simply by explaining why it is preferable to ignorance: we need to explain why it is preferable to ignorance or true belief. But since Gettier, it is no longer enough even to explain why it is preferable to ignorance or true belief. We now need to explain why it is preferable to ignorance or *justified* true belief. I do not mean to imply that Gettier moved the goalposts, but he did raise the bar. And as we have seen, that makes it more tempting to duck the challenge, and deny that knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief is.

Let us return now to Plato's own solution to his puzzle, the idea that knowledge is more durable, more stable than true belief. I have explained why this solution is unsatisfactory, as it stands. But Williamson defends a qualified version of it, which does not depend on the claim about an essential matching between mind and world, which I commented on in 8.3.

Knowledge, Williamson explains, is less likely to be lost than mere true belief is when new evidence comes to light:

p. 205 One can lose a mere true belief by discovering the falsity of further beliefs on which it had been essentially based; quite often, the truth will out. One cannot lose knowledge in that way, because a true belief essentially based on false beliefs does not constitute knowledge. For example, I might derive the true belief that this road goes to Larissa from the two false (but perhaps justified) ↴ beliefs that Larissa is due north and that this road goes due north; when dawn breaks in an unexpected quarter and I realize that this road goes south, without having been given any reason to doubt that Larissa is due north, I abandon the belief that this road goes to Larissa.²⁶

It is true, of course, that some beliefs are adhered to dogmatically, whatever evidence comes to light. But Williamson claims that *if we are rational*, then knowledge is more durable than mere true belief:

Present knowledge is less vulnerable than mere present true belief to *rational* undermining by future evidence [...] Other things being equal, given rational sensitivity to new evidence, present knowledge makes future true belief more likely than mere present true belief does.²⁷

This is an ingenious elaboration of Plato's own solution to his puzzle, but it is unsatisfactory for three reasons.

First, on Williamson's account, as on Plato's, the advantage of knowledge over true belief varies depending on how probable it is that the belief concerned will be undermined by the discovery of another truth; and the greater value of knowledge is sometimes negligible, because the probability of discovering such a truth is sometimes negligible.

Second, on Williamson's account, again like Plato's, the advantage of knowledge over true belief only concerns the future, because of course that is what durability is all about. So knowledge that does not have a shelf life is no more valuable, as a guide to acting the right way, than true belief.

Williamson concedes the second point, but he argues that it does not represent a shortcoming in his account: 'The present argument concerns only delayed impact, not action at the next "instant". We do not value knowledge more than true belief for instant gratification.'²⁸ But this is unconvincing. It is true that we do not value knowledge for instant gratification; but we do not value it for deferred gratification either. Knowledge is sometimes gratifying and sometimes painful, and the value we attach to it does not normally depend on which it is. But we do value a great deal of knowledge, especially knowledge gained without inference by perception, because we can put it to immediate use. Hence, an account like Williamson's or Plato's, which makes the advantage of knowledge over true belief contingent on what may happen in the future, remains open to the charge that it is unsatisfactory or incomplete.

p. 206 One might respond to these two points, on Williamson's behalf, by denying that knowledge is more valuable than true belief regardless of the future, by accepting that the difference in value between knowledge and true belief can be vanishingly small, and by insisting that, if we are rational, knowledge is *normally* more durable than true belief. In other words, one might simply insist that this is the best that we can do, or that it is all that it makes sense to attempt. After all, if someone claimed that a Fiat is better than a Ford because it is more durable, their argument would not be invalidated by pointing out that this is normally, but not invariably, the case. But a third objection shows that even on these limited terms, Williamson's solution to Plato's puzzle fails.

Remember: Williamson's solution is that if we are rational, knowledge is less likely to be undermined by future evidence than true belief. Knowledge, he says, is relatively robust. Here again is the example I cited earlier:

I might derive the true belief that this road goes to Larissa from the two false (but perhaps justified) beliefs that Larissa is due north and that this road goes due north; when dawn breaks in an unexpected quarter and I realize that this road goes south, without having been given any reason to doubt that Larissa is due north, I abandon the belief that this road goes to Larissa.

But what does this example really show? According to Williamson, it shows that knowledge is less vulnerable to rational undermining by future evidence than true belief. But this is not quite right. The claim it really supports is that knowledge or true belief whose justification does not include a falsehood (NFL) is less vulnerable than true belief whose justification does include a falsehood (FL).^{*} Williamson is right that a true belief essentially based on false beliefs does not constitute knowledge. But a true belief that is *not* essentially based on false beliefs may not constitute knowledge either. So the example supports the claim—which no doubt is true—that *either* knowledge or true belief NFL is more valuable than true belief FL. But it does not support the claim that knowledge is more valuable than true belief regardless of how the belief is justified.

We have already seen that Gettier made the *Meno* puzzle harder to solve, because he showed that we cannot solve it just by explaining why knowledge is more valuable than true belief. We need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than *justified* true belief. As I put it earlier, he raised the bar. ↪ Then, when epistemology after Gettier gathered pace, each time a more exacting set of conditions for knowledge was shown to be insufficient, the bar was raised by another increment.

One of the times this happened was in the early 1970s, when several philosophers pointed out that Gettier's counterexamples to the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief are cases where a falsehood happens to justify a truth, and proposed on the strength of that observation that knowledge is true belief NFL. But examples showing that true belief NFL is not sufficient for knowledge sprung up in the literature like mushrooms, so the proposal failed.²⁹

This development made the puzzle even more difficult to solve than it had been for Gettier, because it showed that we can't even solve it by explaining why knowledge is more valuable than *justified* true belief: we need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief NFL. As we have seen, Williamson's example sets knowledge on a par with true belief NFL. So of course it fails to explain why knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief, *whatever* kind of justification for the belief we may have.

In sum, the solutions to the *Meno* puzzle proposed by Plato and Williamson fail for similar reasons. First, they both imply that the advantage of knowledge over true belief depends on how likely it is that a truth that would undermine the belief will come to light. Second, neither solution explains why knowledge without a shelf life is more valuable than true belief. Third, Plato fails to explain why it is better to know than to have the right opinion, however stubborn the opinion is, whereas Williamson fails to explain why it is better to know than to have the right opinion, however free from the taint of falsehood the justification for the opinion is.³⁰

8.5 A new solution

The puzzle in the *Meno* is surprisingly hard to solve, and this makes it tempting to abandon the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true ↪ belief. The conviction that knowledge—fruit of the 'sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant'—is a precious thing is an ineradicable part of human culture. But on our journeys to Larissa, and on our longer journeys to our various Ithacas, perhaps it is simply the truth that we desire, and it does not matter whether we attain the specially privileged relationship to it we call 'knowledge', as long as we are guided by the truth.

I want to suggest first that we do indeed want to be guided by the truth, when this is possible, no less and no more; and second, that this fact alone explains why we value knowledge above true belief. So I want to reconcile the sceptical sentiment expressed in the last paragraph with Plato's conviction that knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief, and do justice to both. If this is the right approach, the mistake made by philosophers on both sides of the debate—both those who accept Plato's view that knowledge is the better guide and those who reject it³¹—is to force a choice that does not exist, between being guided by knowledge and being 'merely' guided by the truth.

The solution I propose is a corollary of the theory defended in Chapter 7, that knowledge is the ability to be guided by the facts. As I explained in 7.2, the idea that knowledge is an ability transforms the task of defining knowledge, because instead of asking what we need to add to belief to get knowledge, or how knowledge can be acquired, we are forced to ask how knowledge gets exercised or expressed, since this is invariably how abilities are defined. And it is quite easy to say how knowledge gets expressed. For example, the traveller's knowledge that Larissa is due north gets expressed whenever he is guided by the fact that

Larissa is due north, in what he thinks or does, say, when he takes the road that leads north to get to Larissa, or when he deduces that he is heading in the wrong direction from the fact that he is heading south.

p. 209 Of course, a traveller who merely believes that Larissa is due north, without knowing it, can take the road that leads north on the *ground* or *assumption* that Larissa is due north. We can imagine him murmuring, 'Larissa is due north; so I shall take that road.' But doing an act on a ground or assumption is different from being guided by a fact, and one cannot be guided by a fact one does not know, any more than one can follow a guide ↵ one cannot see. If the traveller sees the guide taking the left fork and follows him, then he is guided by the guide; but if he hallucinates him taking the left fork, and takes it himself for that reason, then he is not guided by the guide, even if the hallucination happens to be true.

The difference between the two cases is reflected in the difference between explanations that refer to knowledge and ones that refer to belief. Thus, compare 'He took the road that leads north because he knew that it leads to Larissa' and 'He took the road that leads north because he believed that it leads to Larissa.' Only the knowledge-involving explanation is equivalent to one in which the fact about the road is itself the *explanans*: 'Why did he take the road that leads north?' 'Because it leads to Larissa.' Why are these explanations equivalent? Because the knowledge-involving explanation cites (or purports to cite) a fact about his situation that he was aware of and responded to, whereas the belief-involving explanation merely refers (or purports to refer) to his state of mind. (Compare: 'Why did he go to the door?' — 'Because he heard the bell ring' or 'Because the bell rang.')

This provides a simple solution to the puzzle in the *Meno*. For we do not only care about *what* we do, and think, and feel, we also care about *why* we do it, think it, and feel it, and we want our deeds and thoughts and feelings to be guided by the truth.* Believing something tends to influence thought and behaviour in the same way as knowing it, but thought and behaviour influenced by belief are not guided by the truth, regardless of whether the belief is true. The man who has the right opinion about the way to Larissa, but has never been there and does not really know, will lead us in the right direction, as Socrates points out. So if all we cared about was getting to Larissa, we would not, or at least should not, prefer knowledge to mere true belief. But if we want to be guided by the truth, then we are bound to value knowledge above true belief.

p. 210 But why does it matter to us whether we are guided by the truth? As we saw earlier, the stability and durability that Socrates said makes knowledge a better guide than true belief to acting the right way can be achieved if we merely believe we have 'worked out the cause'. Similarly, if a traveller on the road to Larissa *believes* he knows which road to take, it will seem to him as if he is guided by the truth, whether he is really knows it or not. Why isn't this enough for us? Why do we want more? As Hume once put it, these ↵ questions seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty from which we have endeavoured to extricate ourselves.

But in fact it isn't the same uncertainty at all. The question of why it matters to us whether we are guided by the truth is interesting, but it is different from the question we began with, and it has a different answer. The answer, presumably, is similar to Nozick's answer to his question about the experience machine he describes in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.³² As he points out, the fact that most of us would not choose to plug in to the machine suggests that there are things that matter to us other than how our lives feel 'from the inside': 'Perhaps what we want is to live [...] ourselves, in contact with reality', he says, and machines cannot do these things for us. Nozick's remark is partly about our desire to lead an active life and partly about our desire for reality rather than illusion, both of which seem to be basic values shared by most human beings, however difficult they are to explain.

My aim in this chapter was not to discover the roots of these values in the human psyche. I have simply tried to show three things. First, Plato's conviction that knowledge is a better guide than true belief to acting the right way is consistent with the ostensibly sceptical thought (for that is how it initially appeared) that all we

care about, or can reasonably care about, is being guided by the truth. Second, the reason why Plato's own solution to the puzzle in the *Meno* and Williamson's elaboration of it both fail is that the resources they deploy are too limited. In fact they are limited to two elements only: what we do, will do, or may do; and what we believe, will believe, or may believe. Only action and belief. And this is too limited a range of factors to explain why knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief. And finally, the reason why it is too limited is that the explanation lies beyond what we do and believe; it lies in the reasons why we do it and believe it.

I do not mean to suggest that we always care about being guided by the truth in every aspect of our lives. But to the extent that we care about the truth, we care about knowledge. For seeking the truth is seeking knowledge, as we saw earlier. And being guided by the truth is being guided by knowledge, as we can see now. We cannot hope to be guided by a pillar of cloud, and illuminated by a pillar of fire, like the children of Israel crossing the desert to the promised land. The truth no longer announces itself in quite this way. But we can be guided by the truth, as long as we know it. And that is a sufficient reason to value knowledge more highly than belief.

Notes

- * In fact we need to add the qualification: *as long as there is some chance that the falsehood will come to light*. There may be falsehoods that can never come to light. For example, if Goldbach's conjecture, that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers, is true but unprovable, its contradictory is an undiscoverable falsehood.
- * The same argument applies *pari passu* if we compare knowledge with true belief in circumstances where the subject does not have knowledge because of the presence of counter-evidence. Cases like Ginet's story about barn façades (see above, 6.4) only support the claim that present knowledge *or mere present true belief in the absence of counter-evidence* is less vulnerable than present true belief *in the presence of counter-evidence* to rational undermining by future evidence.
- * The next three paragraphs repeat material from 7.2 and 7.3.1, so that this chapter can be read through without jumping back to those sections. I apologize to readers who remember these points well.
- * I make no distinction between being guided by the facts and being guided by the truth (see 7.2).

Notes

1. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 60.
2. The interpretation, but not the name, derives from *Romans*, 5.12–21.
3. Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.17. Other quotations from *The City of God* are from 14.1 and 14.11–15.
4. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 60; see also Headlam, 'Prometheus and the Garden of Eden'.
5. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, pp. 60–1. Kant's interpretation of the story is comparable. See his *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*, repr. in Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, esp. p. 226.
6. Arnold, *Genesis*, p. 61.
7. *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah I, Bereishis/Genesis*, p. 30.
8. Several other implausible interpretations were defended by rabbis anxious to finesse the apparent lie: 'You shall surely be punished'; 'You shall surely die within a thousand years'; 'You shall be deserving of death', etc. See Linetsky, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation*, p. 137.
9. *Julian*, vol.3, p. 327.
10. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 62.
11. Pritchard ('Knowledge and Understanding', pp. 5–8) distinguishes between the *primary* problem of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than true belief, the *secondary* problem of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than any epistemic standing (such as justified true belief) falling short of knowledge, and the *tertiary* problem of explaining why knowledge has a distinctive kind of value that any epistemic standing falling short of knowledge does not have, and does not merely have the same kind of value to a greater degree. The solution proposed here addresses all three problems.
12. Sosa, 'The Place of Truth in Epistemology', p. 156.

13. Horwich, *Truth-Meaning-Reality*, pp. 58f.
14. I shall not discuss the doctrine of recollection, which Socrates refers to in this passage. See Vlastos, 'Anamnesis in the *Meno*'.
15. Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, p. 7.
16. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §§6 & 12.
17. See, for example, Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, pp. 122f; Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*; Pritchard, *Knowledge*, ch.7.
18. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'; cf. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, p. 139.
19. Wright, 'Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon', p. 88.
20. Kaplan, 'It's Not What You Know That Counts', p. 361.
21. Swain, 'Reasons, Causes and Knowledge'.
22. Nozick, *Philosophical Explorations*, pp. 178ff.
23. Cf. Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, pp. 19ff.
24. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 40.
25. Attempts to show that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because it is acquired through the exercise of intellectual virtues or skills have been criticized on the same grounds. See Haddock et al. (eds), *Epistemic Value*, p. 3; cf. Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge I*, Lecture IV; Riggs, 'Beyond Truth and Falsehood: The Real Value of Knowing that P', pp. 87–108; Zagzebski, 'The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good'; Greco, 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief', p. 134.
26. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 78. Williamson's immediate purpose in this passage is to argue that explanations of behaviour referring to knowledge are not equivalent to ones referring to belief. The argument in 6.4 supports this view.
27. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 101.
28. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 79.
29. Feldman, 'An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counter-Examples', pp. 68–9; Shope, *The Analysis of Knowing*, chs.1 & 2.
30. A partly similar discussion of Williamson's solution can be found in Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, pp. 13–19.
31. The sceptics include Kaplan, Kvanvig, and Pritchard; for citations, see notes 17 and 20. The non-sceptics include Zagzebski, Greco, Sosa, and Goldman & Olsson. See Zagzebski, 'The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good', pp. 12–28; Greco, 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief'; Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge I*, lecture 4; Goldman & Olsson, 'Reliabilism and the Value of Knowledge'.
32. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 42ff.