

# No need to know

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**Abstract** I introduce and defend an argument against the popular view that anything falling short of knowledge falls short in value. The nature of belief and cognitive psychological research on memory, I claim, support the argument. I also show that not even the most appealing mode of knowledge is distinctively valuable.

**Keywords** Value of knowledge · Knowledge · Position to know · Dispositional belief · Memory

## 1 Introduction

In the *Meno* Plato tries to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. Philosophers for some while have generally agreed that there is something here to explain. There is more recent agreement on something stronger: not just mere true belief, but *anything* falling short of knowledge is less valuable.<sup>1</sup> The value of knowledge is distinctive. I briefly go over evidence for this more recent view, then I introduce and defend an argument against. Finally, I extend the argument, concluding that not even the most appealing mode of knowledge is distinctively valuable. Throughout the discussion I remain neutral on exactly what is allegedly distinctive about the value of knowledge. Maybe it's the *degree* of value, maybe it's the *kind* of value. I am silent even about the general variety of value at issue. Often

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., BonJour (2010), Carter et al. (2013), DePaul (2009), Olsson (2007), Pritchard (2007, 2010). Cf. Fantl and McGrath (2009), Kvanvig (2003, 2009), and Williamson (2000).

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philosophers contrast it with practical value and refer to it as *epistemic* value, but that illuminates less than one might think. It's similar to referring to the congressional value of congress or the feline value of cats.

## 2 Knowledge acknowledged

On a standard account, knowledge is justified true belief plus something that rules out Gettier cases, cases in which it is only accidental that believing with justification leads to truth. If knowledge is distinctively valuable, it has a value that it doesn't merely inherit from some subset of its proper parts. Anything that "falls short" of knowledge—such as belief, true belief, justified belief, and so on—falls short in value too. Allegedly, this leads to a problem. Pritchard (2007: 87) calls it the *secondary value problem*: the problem of explaining why knowledge has this value. The view that knowledge is distinctively valuable seems true, yet it allegedly isn't clear enough why the view is true. Still, many philosophers treat it as a default view.<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Kvanvig is one of the few philosophers to comment on why there even seems to be a secondary value problem. Kvanvig (2009: 345) says that knowledge-ascriptions legitimately close inquiry, while ascriptions of things that fall short of knowledge do not:

It is banal to remark that Bo believes something that he ought to investigate further, or even that Joe ought to investigate further even though his believing is correct, a display of cognitive excellence, and justified or rational. Things are different, however, when we utter the perplexing 'Bo knows...but ought to check further.'

Hence, to Kvanvig (2009: 344) knowledge seems "ordinarily thought of, or assumed, to be more valuable than its proper subparts." And, he (2009: 346) adds, if there were no such general assumption, then "the focus in the history of epistemology on the nature and extent of knowledge would be downright indefensible." The history of epistemology, charitably interpreted, assumes as a "working hypothesis" that knowledge is distinctively valuable. Ultimately, Kvanvig rejects the assumption. But he still thinks it starts out with a default status.

Carter et al. (2013: 3716 n. 2) think a simple thought experiment, which they attribute to Pritchard, generates the "insight" that knowledge has "special epistemic value". The thought experiment: if offered possession of either knowledge or mere true belief, knowledge seems preferable. Presumably, they mean to add that knowledge also seems preferable to anything else falling short of it, and that

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<sup>2</sup> When BonJour (2010: 58–61) for example attacks fallibilism, he crucially and without explanation assumes knowledge is the "epistemic summum bonum." Anything short of it lacks its value. And, for example, when Pritchard (2007: 87) originally names the secondary value problem, he just takes it as a given that there is a problem here to solve. For other value problems concerning knowledge, see Pritchard (2007).

preferences here reveal value differences. So, knowledge seems distinctively valuable.

There are of course many partial, potential explanations of knowledge's value. Perhaps, for example, knowledge is a kind of norm (e.g., of assertion, belief, action, or practical reasoning), or perhaps the true analysis of knowledge displays its worth. But by itself, this isn't evidence that knowledge is *distinctively* valuable. Some things falling short of knowledge could have competing virtues, such that they share its value. So, we should not assume that a given normative status or analysis of knowledge by itself explains why there is a secondary value problem.

### 3 Knowledge depreciated

I will develop an argument against the distinctive value of knowledge. Support for the argument also reveals that the evidence for knowledge's distinctive value is misleading. As noted earlier, knowledge has epistemic components, a truth component, and a psychological component. Now, even Kvanvig (2003) and Pritchard (2010), who deny that knowledge is distinctively valuable, still think knowledge *in part* derives whatever value it has from its psychological component. I propose, however, that knowledge derives its value from its epistemic and truth components. Eliminate its psychological component, and the value needn't diminish. In particular, I claim that the relation of *being in a position to know* can share the value of knowledge, but being in a position to know doesn't involve belief. So the value of knowledge isn't distinct.

My argument, more precisely, is:

- P1. Not all dispositional knowledge that *p* is distinct in value from being in a position to know that *p*.
- P2. If not all dispositional knowledge that *p* is distinct in value from being in a position to know that *p*, then knowledge is not distinctively valuable.
- C. Knowledge is not distinctively valuable.

To clarify: an *occurrent* mental state is a mental state that is in some way before the mind, making a difference to consciousness. A merely *dispositional* mental state is not before the mind. It is "stored" or "non-occurrent", absent from consciousness. It is commonsensical to think that, a moment ago, you believed that Plato taught Aristotle. If you had the belief, it was dispositional. Now that you're reflecting on it and its content, it's occurrent. Traditionally, knowledge is not thought to be a mental state, but rather a relation between mind and world.<sup>3</sup> Still, knowledge inherits dispositional or occurrent status just when its mental state component—belief—is dispositional or occurrent. S's knowledge that *p* is dispositional only if S's belief that *p* is dispositional. S's knowledge that *p* is occurrent only if S's belief that *p* is occurrent. Knowledge has dispositional and occurrent modes.

<sup>3</sup> For famous rejection of this traditional view, see Williamson (2000: Chap. 1).

A little-explored relation that falls short of knowing is *being in a position to know*. Three points about this relation are generally accepted.<sup>4</sup> First, if S is in a position to know that *p*, then *p* is true. Second, if S is in a position to know that *p*, then there is no epistemic “obstacle” to S’s knowing that *p*. This could mean, for example, that S’s justification is strong enough for S to know that *p*, and that it would not be accidental if S’s believing on this justification led to truth. Third, being in a position to know that *p* does not require believing that *p*. Since knowledge requires belief, being in a position to know is not itself a kind of knowing. When in a position to know, you are all set to know. If you would just believe that *p* (on your justification), then you’d know that *p*.<sup>5</sup>

P1 states that there is a mode of knowledge—namely, dispositional knowledge—which sometimes shares all value with something besides knowledge—namely, being in a position to know. I will offer two lines of support for P1. The first centers on the fact that, in some cases, only something trivial distinguishes being in a position to know from dispositionally knowing. Consider two subjects, Al and Bill, who are maximally similar, but with this difference: currently Al *almost* believes that *p*, but does not believe that *p*; and Bill *believes* that *p*, dispositionally. Al fails to satisfy some necessary condition for dispositionally believing that *p*. It’s not clear what all these necessary conditions are. Perhaps, in order for a subject to dispositionally believe that *p*, the subject must have occurrently believed that *p* at some point.<sup>6</sup> If so, Al and Bill are as follows. Al has satisfied all requirements for

<sup>4</sup> See Conee (2005: 449), David and Warfield (2008: 170–1), Fantl and McGrath (2009: 84), and Williamson (2000: 95, 174 n. 3).

<sup>5</sup> A referee suggests that my slogan here is threatened by a kind of case Kvanvig (2014: 188) discusses, where forming a belief will eliminate one’s evidence for it. You might be in a position to know that you’ve never considered *q*. But if you form the belief that you’ve never considered *q*, you’ll thereby consider *q*, eliminating your evidence for the belief. I think this sort of case interestingly reveals that there are propositions one can be in a position to know, but cannot know. Knowledge requires belief and justification, and in these cases forming belief eliminates justification. Still, I think my conditional about being in a position to know holds: if you would just believe that *p* (on your justification), then you’d know that *p*. The cases in question are simply ones where the conditional’s antecedent cannot be satisfied. Since the belief would eliminate its justification, it cannot be formed on its justification. I thank the referee for encouraging reflection here.

Williamson (2000: 95) would strike the parenthetical from my conditional: “If one is in a position to know, and one has done what one is in a position to do to decide whether *p* is true, then one does know *p*.” Unfortunately, this attributes knowledge in cases where one ultimately “decides” based on mere desire, bias, fear, etc.

Being in a position to know and dispositional belief have knotted connections with tacit belief, inactive belief, implicit belief, and a disposition to believe. This isn’t the place to unravel the knots.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bergmann (2005: 421), Huemer (1999: 356 n. 15) and Moser (1989: Chap. 1). One might deny that dispositional belief requires this. An ordinary subject may have never occurrently believed that she was born after her grandfather. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that she dispositionally believes it. However, it may be more plausible that the subject simply has a *disposition to believe* she was born after her grandfather—she is all set to believe it—and, strictly speaking, does not yet dispositionally believe it. This option is attractive in part because it prevents an explosion of beliefs. It prevents the ordinary, finite-in-mind subject from counting as believing indefinitely many propositions, such as that she was born after her grandfather had been alive for a minute, that she was born after her grandfather had been alive for a half a minute, that she was born after her grandfather had been alive for a quarter of a minute, etc.

Still, suppose dispositional belief does not require prior occurrent belief. Exactly what does it require, then? The complete answer is far from clear. As a result, there will be cases where something counts as

dispositionally believing  $p$ , except for having at some point occurrently believed that  $p$ . Bill indeed occurrently believed that  $p$  in the past. Bill's belief that  $p$  is currently dispositional.

Here is one of many suitable ways of making the difference between Al and Bill concrete. Cognitive psychological research reveals that memory processing involves significant gist extraction.<sup>7</sup> After specific experiential information enters memory processing, its gist is often combined with other information already in memory. This combined information is stored, and the more specific information that entered is often just dumped. The subject may have never occurrently believed the gist. She may have just believed the more specific information. Suppose, then, that Al and Bill looked over a list of names: Anscombe, Berkeley, Chisholm, and so on. When going over the list, Al did not occurrently believe that  $p$ : it is a list of philosophers' names. But Bill did occurrently believe that  $p$ . Due to normally-functioning memory processing, Bill eventually stores something like that information, and (via gist extraction) *so does Al*. Each is such that, if he eventually activated that information,  $p$  would not only seem true but also familiar and already accepted. Each would occurrently believe that  $p$  upon activating the stored information, and it wouldn't seem to either as if he is just then *learning* that  $p$ .

Whether  $p$  counts as dispositionally believed right now ultimately depends on whether it was occurrently believed earlier. Due to their slightly different psychological histories, Bill currently dispositionally believes that  $p$ , but Al does not. By stipulation, Al and Bill have the same justification for believing that  $p$  (if Al ever had more, he's forgotten it),  $p$  is true in each case, and neither subject is poised to be Gettiered. As a result, Bill dispositionally knows that  $p$ , while Al is in a position to know that  $p$ . Still, Al and Bill are near mental duplicates. They have all the same dispositions and occurrent mental states. Their slight difference in dispositional mental states is ineffectual. They would act and reason identically, even regarding  $p$ . They would have phenomenologically identical mental lives. And so on.

Evaluation of Al and Bill, I claim, supports P1. In cases where knowing and being in a position to know are this similar, these relations can be identical in value. Here, we see the thought experiment that Carter et al. cite does not support the distinctive value of knowledge. If offered to be in Bill's current position or Al's, I would have no preference. There's no reason to have one. There is a related way to see support for P1 here. If Al's and Bill's current relations to  $p$  differed in value, it's implausible that this would ultimately be explained by something as insignificant as which of Al and Bill previously occurrently believed that  $p$  (especially given how

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Footnote 6 continued

dispositional belief, and cases where something *nearly* counts as dispositional belief, but we won't be able to tell which cases are which. The difference will be hard to detect and apparently trivial. It won't split the cases into groups that seem importantly different, or even relevantly different. If offered to be in one group or the other, we'd have no preference. The difference between dispositionally knowing and being in a position to know, then, can be hard to detect and apparently trivial, tracking no preferences. This supports P1. Thanks to a referee for pressing me to clarify several points here.

<sup>7</sup> See Bernecker (2008: Chap. 9), Michaelian (2011), and especially Schacter and Addis (2007).

memory processing stores related information that wasn't previously believed).<sup>8</sup> We could have nearly maximal information about Al and Bill, and then learn about their slightly different psychological histories. But, intuitively, this unremarkable discovery does not uncover a difference in value—not a difference that makes the value of knowledge *distinctive*. It might uncover that Bill alone currently achieves something (true belief) or succeeds with respect to  $p$ . But it is not a priori that achievements and such are preferable or help constitute distinctively valuable relations. Rather, it is a generalization from cases. My support for P1 undermines the generalization, not vice versa.

Here is a second line of support for P1. Dispositional knowledge requires dispositional belief, which requires belief simpliciter. What does belief simpliciter require? On *representationalism*, the standard philosophical view about belief, S's having a belief that  $p$  requires S to bear a special relation to a mental representation that  $p$ . Elsewhere (Frise, manuscript), I've argued that if this view is correct, then, given the research on the cognitive psychology of memory, we have no dispositional beliefs. We typically do not mentally represent the propositions that are not contents of occurrent mental states, even the propositions that we have occurrently believed. And when we *do* mentally represent these propositions, we typically don't bear the relation to them that belief requires. Given the standard view of beliefs, the best explanation of the data is that memory doesn't store beliefs for later activation. Instead memory creates beliefs. Memory is generative, not preservative.<sup>9</sup> Given representationalism, as a contingent matter of fact all beliefs are occurrent. So, all knowledge is too. None is dispositional.

I'll explain how this supports P1 by explaining how something even weaker supports P1. It doesn't ultimately matter that it seems we lack dispositional beliefs. What ultimately matters is that we *could* discover that we lack them, depending on what we discover about our psychology and about the correct theory of belief. In this way, we could discover that we lack dispositional knowledge. We would in this way discover that the propositions we apparently dispositionally know are instead ones we are in a position to know. But we would not in this way discover that there is any less value than we had attributed. Instead, we would just discover that dispositionally knowing isn't the only relation with the value we had attributed. When we attribute value to a psychological relation, empirical psychological data and philosophical theory about that relation won't rule out whether there is *anything* with that value. They may only rule out certain psychological entities as (part of) the actual bearers of the value. If they ruled out that we have psychological item X, then X must not be (part of) the only potential bearer of the value we are inclined to attribute. Theory and data could rule out that we have dispositional beliefs, thereby ruling out that we have dispositional knowledge. This would simply reveal that being in a position to know shares the value of dispositional knowledge. Whenever

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kvanvig (2003), who claims that knowledge and Gettiered belief differ only in some trivial property that could not explain a difference in their value.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Frise (2015) and Michaelian (2011).

we had thought that dispositional knowledge legitimately closes inquiry, instead being in a position to know closes it.

If we could learn in this way that being in a position to know shares the value of dispositional knowledge, then it in fact shares that value. Our value-attributions are insensitive to our learning certain details about the bearer of value. Apparently the details don't affect the value. Whatever the details are, the value remains. Compare: our aesthetic value-attributions to seemingly colored objects are insensitive to our learning whether the objects are actually colored. Maybe the beautiful painting has color, maybe (as many color scientists and philosophers tell us) it lacks color and instead simply causes certain color experiences. Apparently these details don't matter. Objects with color, and non-colored objects with certain causal profiles, share aesthetic value.

You might object to this line of support for P1 as follows. Let's grant that, on representationalism, we could learn that we have no dispositional beliefs and we could, as a result, reasonably conclude that knowledge lacks distinctive value. Still, it is better to abandon representationalism than to accept that conclusion. We should select a theory of belief on which our having dispositional beliefs is relevantly immune to psychological research.

However, it isn't clearly reasonable to sacrifice a leading theory of belief just to preserve, not knowledge's value, but the *uniqueness* of its value. If knowledge lacks distinctive value, it doesn't follow that knowledge has less value or a lesser kind of value than we had thought. Knowledge may just share its value with something else. And the sacrifice isn't clearly dialectically appropriate. If representationalism conflicts with knowledge being distinctively valuable, then the evidence for the former should count at least somewhat against the latter. At any rate, we will at least have learned that the latter has a significant, previously unappreciated cost: it forces the abandonment of the most popular theory of belief.

Most importantly, abandoning representationalism does not preserve the distinctive value of knowledge. This is because we find similar support for P1 even if we shift to the only promising and defended alternative theory of belief. That theory is *dispositionalism*: S believes that  $p$  iff S has a set of suitable dispositions toward  $p$ . Believing, according to dispositionalism, has to do with being poised to act and reason in certain ways and to have certain experiences. Now, for any proposition, more than one set of dispositions suffices for believing it, and it isn't clear exactly what these sets are. When we attribute belief that  $p$  to a subject, we aren't aware of exactly which relevant set she has. For many ordinary attributions of belief that  $p$ , we could discover that the subject lacks some disposition necessary for having a set that's sufficient for belief that  $p$  (regardless of whether the belief would have been dispositional or occurrent). The same holds for knowledge-attributions, since knowledge requires belief. For many ordinary attributions of knowledge that  $p$ , we could discover that the subject lacks some disposition that would enable knowledge that  $p$ . But the discovery would not thereby reveal that some associated attribution of value is incorrect. The value could remain. So knowledge mustn't be the sole bearer of it. So knowledge's value isn't distinctive, even on dispositionalism.

Less abstractly: suppose I know that you are as even-keeled as an island, such that you aren't even disposed to feel surprise when you gain strong evidence that a belief of yours is false. You point out to me that  $q$ : the list of names that Al and Bill read is a list of philosophers' names. You talk at length about the work of each named philosopher. I attribute belief and knowledge that  $q$  to you, and also value to your relation to  $q$ . I do so in response to your behavior and to  $q$ 's clear truth. I might be in a position to infer reasonably from your behavior that you are disposed to affirm  $q$ , and that you have many other dispositions concerning  $q$ . But I am not in a position to reasonably infer just which dispositions you have that together suffice for your believing  $q$ . Now suppose I become reasonably convinced that dispositionalism is true and that, because you aren't disposed to feel surprise upon gaining strong evidence against  $q$ , you are actually one suitable disposition shy of any set sufficient for belief that  $q$ . I learn you don't believe  $q$ . So I learn you don't know that  $q$ .

Still, my value-attribution wouldn't change. I valued your relation to  $q$  even when I knew you were even-keeled. To me, what keeps you from belief and knowledge is just a surprising technicality, something irrelevant to my original value-attribution. And this case is not peculiar. We are better at spotting value than knowledge. As was true on representationalism, many ordinary knowledge-attributions could turn out to be false due to a subtlety about our psychology and about what belief requires. Our value-attributions are insensitive to these subtleties, yet our value-attributions are generally true, and would be true even if these subtleties played out differently. So the value must not depend on these subtleties. Some things falling short of knowledge will share its value.

The support for P2 is straightforward. P2 states that knowledge is not distinctively valuable if some dispositional knowledge shares its value with being in a position to know. If knowledge is distinctively valuable, any mode of it is too. The literature evaluating knowledge has never limited its object to some mode of knowledge. And no such limit appears to have been intended.<sup>10</sup> An ascription of *any* mode of knowledge legitimately closes inquiry. *Any* mode of knowledge seems preferable to true belief. And dispositional knowledge is traditionally understood to be a mode of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> If it is not a mode, then a kind of skepticism obtains: we have just a fraction of the knowledge we commonsensically attribute, since at any given time most attributed knowledge would be dispositional. Being in a position to know is not a mode of knowledge. So, if dispositional knowledge is not distinct in value from it, knowledge simpliciter isn't either.

Even if there seems to be, at best, reason to suspend judgment about P1 rather than reason to endorse it, then there is reason to suspend judgment about whether knowledge is distinctively valuable. That is a troublesome enough result. But P1 and P2 are plausible, so we have reason to endorse C; knowledge is not distinctively

<sup>10</sup> Carter et al. (2013), Fantl and McGrath (2009), Pritchard (2007, 2010), and Williamson (2000), for example, nowhere even implicate that they might have intended such a limit. And Kvanvig's (2009: 345–6) discussion of the value of knowledge covers the occurrent/dispositional distinction for beliefs, but doesn't apply it to knowledge; apparently, there's no need to use that distinction to qualify any evaluation of knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Goldman (2011: 260), Huemer (1999), and Moser (1989: 13–23).



valuable. The secondary value problem is illusory. Or, it's not quite what we thought it was. Knowledge *and* certain things that fall short of it have distinctive value. But why? That's the question to answer.

#### 4 Occurrent knowledge depreciated

One way to mitigate the force of C is to identify a specific mode of knowledge that could still be distinctively valuable, even if knowledge simpliciter is not. The most promising mode is *occurrent* knowledge. Maybe, if offered either occurrent knowledge or some relation falling short of it, all else being equal occurrent knowledge is preferable. And maybe the history of epistemology has not focused on knowledge simpliciter, but rather on occurrent knowledge. Occurrent knowledge still might seem distinct in value from being in a position to know. When we reflect on maximally similar subjects like Al and Bill, but where only one of them occurrently knows that  $p$  and the other doesn't even believe  $p$ —the other is in a position to know that  $p$ —we find it plausible that there is a difference in value in their relations to  $p$ . And psychology won't reveal that we lack occurrent beliefs, so there is no reason to think that something besides occurrent knowledge could also be bearing the value we've been attributing to it.

However, for two reasons, not even occurrent knowledge is distinctively valuable. So, C is not softened, and it seems that no mode of knowledge is distinctively valuable. First, when a subject goes to sleep, her occurrent beliefs become dispositional and she loses (nearly) all occurrent knowledge. But it doesn't seem that she loses (nearly) all specially valuable relations to propositions. Second, it's unclear how much we occurrently know at any given time. How much we occurrently know depends on exactly what it takes for a belief to be occurrent rather than dispositional, on what it takes to have a belief, and on what our psychology is like. Settling these issues will settle whether we have around (say) twenty occurrent beliefs at any given time, or instead around five occurrent beliefs (and fifteen further, dispositional beliefs) then. This will settle how much we occurrently know at a time. But it wouldn't settle how many relations of special value there are at any given time. We wouldn't posit fewer relations of special value if we learned that we had fewer occurrent beliefs, nor more relations of special value if we learned that we had more occurrent beliefs. This suggests that occurrent knowledge shares its value with dispositional knowledge. And if occurrent knowledge shares its value with dispositional knowledge, then given P1, some occurrent knowledge shares its value even with being in a position to know.

Finally, it would be a notable and illuminating concession to suppose that just occurrent knowledge is distinctively valuable. The secondary value problem would, again, be illusory. Knowledge simpliciter would not be distinctively valuable. Just some mode of it would be. But why just *that* mode? Since the mode is occurrent, it seems the value would have to do with the subject's perspective. It would be worth exploring whether this supports views of knowledge and justification that attach special significance to the subject's perspective, views like evidentialism and internalism.

## 5 Conclusion

Whether one dispositionally knows that  $p$  or is instead in a position to know that  $p$  can ultimately depend on minor biographical details that would poorly account for the alleged distinctive value of knowledge. And our knowledge-attributions, but not our value-attributions, are hostage to what we learn about the nature of belief, dispositional belief, and our psychology. So, I've argued, knowledge is not distinctively valuable. And it seems that not even occurrent knowledge is distinctively valuable, since in many ordinary cases dispositional and occurrent knowledge share value.

Of course, one could weaken my support for P1 by forfeiting the traditional view that knowledge requires belief, a view accepted even by anti-traditionalists about knowledge like Williamson (2000). If knowledge doesn't require belief, then it may be no surprise that Al and Bill seem to have equally valuable relations to  $p$ . For it could be that *both* currently know that  $p$ , even though Al does not believe that  $p$ . And if knowledge doesn't require belief, then our knowledge-attributions aren't hostage to the relevant discoveries about belief and our psychology. However, this forfeiture would itself set a steep price on the distinctive value of knowledge. And it would have to be shown that the forfeiture is independently motivated, not simply ad hoc. It may have the odd consequence that being in a position to know can in fact be a kind of knowing. After all, what had distinguished these relations was simply that traditional belief-requirement on knowledge.

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