

# Skepticism and the value of knowledge

1

knowledge is no more valuable than  
lasting true belief

*Hawley*

*September 24, 2006*

## **1.1 The main claim motivated and clarified**

### **1.1.1 The main claim motivated**

*Meno*

*know*

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<sup>1</sup>T. Williamson gives a similar example.[20, 87]

*only*

2

*lasting true belief*

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<sup>2</sup>In recent literature, (1) is presented as an obviously true premise ready for deployment in philosophical argument. Zagzebski[21] argues that reliabilist accounts of epistemic justification are incompatible with (1), and, since (1) is obviously true, reliabilism should be rejected. Jones[6] argues, more generally, that any account of epistemic justification which sees epistemic justification as valuable only as a means to gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs, is incompatible with (1), and thus objectionable. Riggs[17] replies that Jones's and Zagzebski's arguments only support the weak conclusion that, in order to preserve (1), certain accounts of justification need to be supplemented. Another sort of argument is given by DePaul[2] and Riggs[18]. They conclude that gaining true beliefs and avoiding falsehoods cannot be the only epistemic values, otherwise (1) would be false. See especially Kvanvig[10] for a useful discussion of the value of knowledge and Pritchard[15] for a helpful review of the growing literature on epistemic value.

1.1.2 The main claim clarified

a state  $s$  of knowing  
that  $p$  is no more valuable than a state of having a true belief that  
 $p$  which will last at least as long as  $s$

*lasting*

*unlikely to be changed*

*not easily dislodged*    *likely to last*

*sspttp ssp T*

*gTTtgTtststsTTTTtTstst*

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$p$

$t_1$

$t_2$

$p$

$p$

in any important respect in which a state  $s$  of knowing that  $p$  is valuable, a state of having a true belief that  $p$  which will last at least as long as  $s$ , is just as valuable

## 1.2 A related claim and an assumption

$p$   $g$   $s$   
 $p$   $s$  **group claim**

weakly rational

## 2 The main claim defended

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## **2.1 Knowledge is useful**

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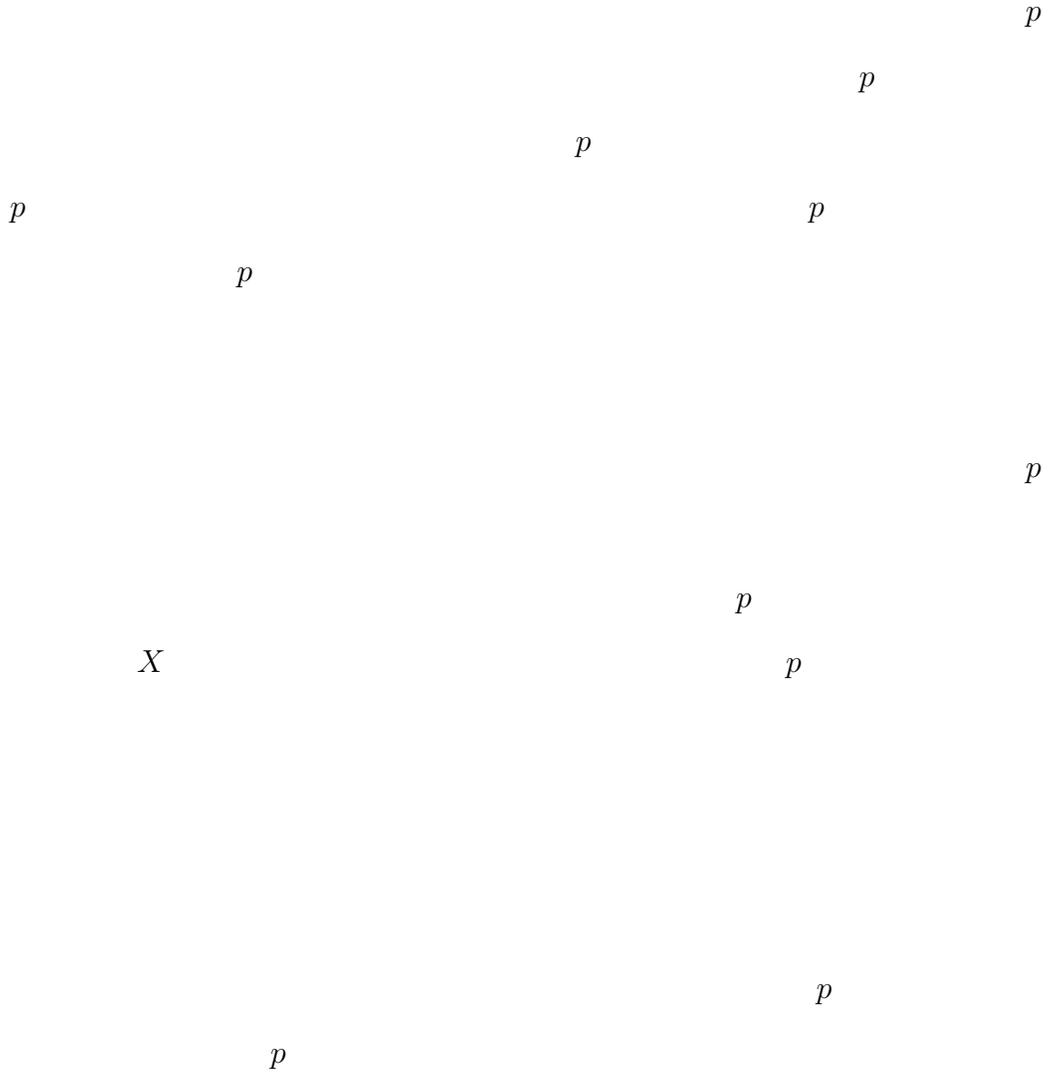
$p$

*p* *p*  
*p*  
*p*  
*p*  
*p*  
*p*  
*other* *p*

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<sup>3</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this and some of the other objections I consider.

## 2.2 Valuable for others



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$p$

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$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

*p*

*p*

---

<sup>4</sup>S. Haslanger[4] has an interesting connected suggestion. She suggests that knowledge is valuable because knowers have and respond to reasons, and being responsive to reasons

*p*                      *p*

*p*

*p*                                      *p*

*p*                                      *p*

*p*

*p*                                      *p*

---

is part of what it is to be autonomous—which is a constitutive part of a flourishing life which is valuable for creatures like us. But the value that Haslanger points to can surely be present whether or not knowledge is present. One can have and respond to reasons even if all one’s beliefs are false, and thus even if one has no knowledge. So Haslanger’s proposed value can be present whether or not one has knowledge. Moreover, I am doubtful that knowing requires having and responding to reasons. But if having and responding to reasons is indeed valuable and present in all knowers, we may, in comparing knowledge to lasting true belief, assume that the believer has and responds to reasons. Note that this assumption would not bring knowledge in the back door as shown by Gettier-style examples like the one in the next paragraph.

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

5

$p$

$p$

$p^6$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

---

<sup>5</sup>Well-known analyses of knowledge fail to provide a plausible candidate. A true belief reliably formed[3], or the output of properly functioning cognitive equipment[13], or tracking the truth in nearby possible worlds[12], is no more detectable than a lasting true belief.

<sup>6</sup>I have heard this objection mentioned in conversation. I am unsure what counts as a topic related to  $p$ . At least knowledge of these topics should provide evidence that you know that  $p$ . And presumably these related topics you know about should not include reasons you have in favor of  $p$ , or else this objection would not significantly differ from the last objection, that when you know you have the detectable property of having reasons.

$p$  always

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

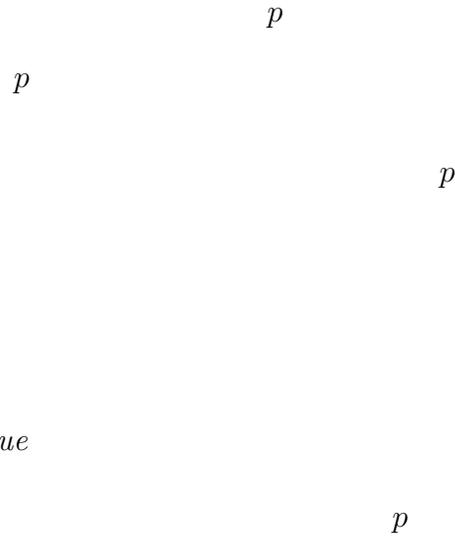
$p$

7

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<sup>7</sup>Now I can return to the objection from the end of section 2.1 that a knower has a more accurate picture of the world than someone who merely has a lasting true belief.

### 2.3 Knowledge as an achievement



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Assuming that the picture is more accurate either because the knower has reasons, or because the knower knows about related topics, by the argument in the present section, the earlier objection fails to show that knowledge is more valuable than lasting true belief, assuming weak rationality.

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*less*

*p*

*p*

## 2.4 A close connection to the world

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

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*p*

*Hawley*

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*Hawley*

*September 24, 2006*

*Hawley*

*September 24, 2006*

*p*

*p*

## 2.5 Valuable as a means

*p*

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<sup>8</sup>Suppose that to have a thorough understanding is something more or different than knowing about related topics or having reasons. Here, one notes that one was too quick to agree when you know you have a thorough understanding. You can know that Fermat's Last Theorem is true without understanding why it is true. You can know because the respected mathematician tells you so. Knowing that *p* does not always bring a thorough understanding. But perhaps someone who knows is more likely to have a thorough understanding—and thus a closer connection to the world—than someone who has a lasting true belief. Here I am unsure what to say in detail, because I am unsure what it is to have a thorough understanding if not to know related things. But, as before, the reply will be that a lasting true believer is no less likely to be exposed to situations in which surrounding lasting true beliefs can be acquired.

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$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

$p$

## 2.6 Knowledge is valuable in itself

9

10

*valued for its own sake (as an end)*                      *valued for the sake of*  
*something else*

*valuable in itself*  
*valuable in virtue of something else*

---

<sup>9</sup>One last proposal is that knowledge has no value. Jonathan Kvanvig[9] makes this surprising claim, arguing that we value other things which we confuse with knowledge. Suffice it to say that if knowledge has no value, the main claim is correct. If knowledge has no value, knowledge surely has no more value than lasting true belief.

<sup>10</sup>C. Korsgaard[8] draws similar distinctions and argues that they should not be collapsed together. I am indebted to R. Langton[11], who amends and criticizes Korsgaard's discussion. However, I ignore many of the complexities which Langton uncovers.

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*test*

*X*

*X*

*X*

*isolation*

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$P_1$

$P_1$

$P_2$

*choice test*

$X$

$Y$

$X$

$Y$

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### 3 Conclusions

#### 3.1 Skepticism about knowledge not considered dangerous

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<sup>11</sup>[7] and [16] contain recent attempts.

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**3.1.1 Reasons for**

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### **3.1.2 Reasons against**

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*p*

*p*

### **3.2 Knowledge devalued?**

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<sup>12</sup>I provide such response in [5] where I argue that certain skeptical arguments can be rationally ignored because suspension of judgment can undermine rational action.

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## **4 Final remarks**

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