**Ought to Believe, Evidential Understanding and the Pursuit of Wisdom[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**

It is almost an epistemological platitude that the goal of inquiry is to pursue truth-acquisition and falsity-avoidance. But further reflection on this dual goal of inquiry reveals that the two (sub)goals are in tension because they are inversely proportionate: the more we satisfy the one (sub)goal the less we satisfy the other and vice versa. I elaborate the inverse proportionality point in some detail and bring out its puzzling implications about the normative question of what one ought to believe. As I argue, given the tension between the two (sub)goals, the problem of the correct regulation of belief-fixation pops to the surface. Call this ‘the James problem’ in tribute to William James who first drew attention to the problem.

As a response ‘to the James Problem’, I sketch the contours of a solution to the problem that involves the rather neglected epistemic concepts of understanding and wisdom and links these concepts with the goal of eudaimonia (or living well). The resultant theory constitutes an approach to epistemic normativity that makes little use of the traditional epistemic concepts of truth and knowledge that have historically dominated the field of epistemology.

‘*We must know the truth*; and *we must avoid error*- these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws’

William James (1896\2008:109)

**1 Introduction**

The working hypothesis of many epistemologists is that the standard (epistemic) goal of inquiry is to simultaneously pursue truth-acquisition and falsity-avoidance.[[2]](#footnote-2) But further reflection on this dual goal of inquiry reveals that the two (sub)goals are in tension because they are inversely proportionate: the more we satisfy the one (sub)goal the less we satisfy the other (and vice versa). The point is sometimes acknowledged in the literature but mostly in passing and its puzzling implications for epistemic normativity have been rather underappreciated.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this paper, I revisit the inverse proportionality point in order to ameliorate this unfortunate predicament.

To this effect, I elaborate the inverse proportionality point in some detail and bring out its puzzling implications about the normative question of what one ought to believe. As I argue, given the tension between the two (sub)goals, the problem of the correct regulation of belief-fixation pops to the surface. That is, what the correct policy of belief-fixation is in light of the fact that we cannot satisfy the two individually valuable (sub)goals to the same extent simultaneously. Call this *‘the James problem’* in tribute to William James (1896) who first drew attention the point.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A natural approach to the James problem is to surmise that we can resolve the tension if we weigh the relative epistemic value of the two (sub)goals and adjudicate which goal is primary and which secondary. I argue, however, that this approach ushers us into the horns of a ‘weighing value dilemma’: either the value of the one (sub)goal completely trumps the value of the other (sub)goal and, therefore, we should solely strive to satisfy one (sub)goal at the complete expense of the other; or we can balance the relative satisfaction of the two (sub)goals on the basis of the relative individual value of the two (sub)goals.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first horn of the dilemma does not take us very far because two very implausible and contrasting policies of belief-fixation emerge on the basis of how we evaluate and weigh these (sub)goals. I call the first policy *epistemic licentiousness* and the second *epistemic asceticism*. The second horn of the dilemma, in essence, restates the initial problem because it is unclear in virtue of what external criterion we can strike the right kind of balance between the two (sub)goals.

As a response to the problem, I follow the second horn of the dilemma and explain that in virtue of the goal of eudaimonia (or good life) we can strike the right kind of balance between the two (sub)goals. Accordingly, I offer a sketch of a solution to the problem that involves the rather neglected epistemic concepts of understanding and wisdom and links these concepts to the Aristotelian goal of eudaimonia. The sketched picture amounts to a novel theory of epistemic normativity that makes little use of the traditional epistemic concepts of truth and knowledge that have historically dominated the field of epistemology.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**2 Unpacking the James Problem: Inverse proportionality and Ought to Believe**

It is widely thought that the epistemic goal of inquiry is Janus-faced: acquiring the truth and avoiding falsity. That is, when we inquire about a certain p we simultaneously aim at the truth about p and avoiding falsity about p, say, about who killed the butler or where I have left my keys. This is the standard and almost platitudinous conception of the epistemic goal of inquiry and one can easily see why: it is an intuitive conceptionthat comports well with the commonplace idea that the epistemic goal of inquiry is acquiring truth and, consequently, avoiding falsity. If, say, I am Poirot investigating the murder of the poor butler, I aim at the truth about the matter and, consequently, aim at avoiding false belief about the matter.

Aiming at the truth implicates aiming at avoiding falsity because aiming at the truth entails aiming at avoiding falsity. If I aim at the truth about the murderer of the butler, then it is logically impossible that I do not aim at avoiding falsity. But the reverse does not hold because it does seem logically possible to aim at avoiding falsity without aiming at the truth. In cases of suspense of judgement, if I suspend judgement that p I avoid the falsity of p but I do not thereby aim at the truth of p.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Now, the James problem consists in the fact that the Janus-faced character of the standard epistemic goal of inquiry induces tension between the two (sub)goals because the two (sub)goals are in implicit, albeit direct competition.[[8]](#footnote-8) The reason is that the two (sub)goals are inversely proportionate: the more we satisfy the one (sub)goal the less we satisfy the other and vice versa. This was James’ original insight.

To grasp the James insight, think of the cognitive mean for truth-acquisition\falsity-avoidance, namely, epistemic justification. Epistemic justification is gradable, comes in degrees and setting the exact threshold of the standards of justification regulates the exact satisfaction of the two (sub)goals. If we set the epistemic standards for justification pretty high [(sub) p(b\e)=0.9][[9]](#footnote-9), then we promote the satisfaction of falsity-avoidance over truth-acquisition because it will be much more demanding and much harder for a belief to count as justified and likely to be true.[[10]](#footnote-10) As a result few beliefs will be considered justified and be endorsed as likely to be true. Accordingly, few false beliefs would be endorsed as justified and likely to be true because of the demandingness of the justification standards.

Instead, if we set the epistemic standards for justification relatively low [(sub) p(b\e)=0.51], then we inversely promote the satisfaction of truth-acquisition over falsity-avoidance because it will be much less demanding and much easier for a belief to count as justified and likely to be true. This occurs because the less demanding epistemic standards of justification are set, the easier is to endorse propositions as justified and likely to be true. And the easier is to endorse propositions as justified and likely to be true, the more likely it is that you acquire more true beliefs, but also more false beliefs; at least in normal, demon-proof worlds that involve no radical cognitive illusion of sorts.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Alternatively, the basic Jamesian insight can be illustrated in vivid terms through a suggestive analogy ofanother (though, merely conventional) norm-governed activity: football (i.e. soccer for Americans).[[12]](#footnote-12) In football, the proximate practical goal is victory and to achieve this you need to score more goals than the conceding goals. But the two (sub)goals are again in tension : the more you play offence than defence, the more likely is to score goals but also to concede goals. Inversely, the more you play defence than offence the less likely is to score goals but also to concede goals. It is, obviously, a matter of offensive\defensive football tactics. It is also a matter of offensive\defensive doxastic tactics in the epistemic game. If you play more for scoring truths you play more offensively (and lower your standards of justification) and if you play more for avoiding false beliefs you play more defensively (and raise up your standards of justification).

This much concludes an outline of the James problem. But at this point some may have worries about the epistemological seriousness of the James problem, so let us present and quickly set aside this objection. Some may object that it is a spurious problem because belief-fixation is quite balanced between the two (sub)goals on its own accord, anyway. So why bother and think that this makes for a philosophically interesting problem?

This worry, however, entirely misses the normative aspect of the James insight, which is the quintessence of the insight. The James insight is not about descriptive epistemic psychology that plausibly for evolutionary reasons is prone to be struck somewhere in-between the continuum of the two (sub)goals.[[13]](#footnote-13) That is, the question is not about how we actually balance and reconcile these two epistemic (sub)goals in our cognitive lives. This is, obviously, a very interesting question on its own right, but one for cognitive psychologists and experimental philosophers and not for epistemologists.

Rather, the philosophical point is about inescapable epistemic normativity and about how we ought to form beliefs in light of the fact that the two goals are in implicit, albeit direct competition. Thus, the problem can be stipulated in these simple terms: if both (sub)goals are epistemically valuable and we cannot equally satisfy both simultaneously, how ought we to regulate belief-fixation? That is the James problem.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Once we set aside worries about the epistemological seriousness of the problem, the natural approach to the puzzle is to surmise that we can resolve the tension if we weigh the relative epistemic value of the two (sub)goals and adjudicate which goal is primary and which secondary. Besides, this is the usual procedure we follow when we have two conflicting practical goals that we cannot equally satisfy simultaneously. If I want ice cream and want to control the glucose levels in my bloodstream, then I weigh the relative value of the two goals. Depending on how the weighing goes, I may decide to refrain from ice cream and defy my ice cream desire, or imprudently decide to have my ice cream and defy my desire for healthy living or balance the two desires and have only some ice cream or have some sugar-free ice cream etc. So, it is completely unsurprising that we should follow the same ‘weighing value approach’ in the epistemic goals case.

The weighing value approach, though, ushers us into the horns of a thorny dilemma: either the weighing shows that the value of the one (sub)goal completely trumps the value of the other (sub)goal and, therefore, we ought to promote the exclusive satisfaction of only one (sub)goal; or the weighing shows that we can somehow balance and compromise the relative satisfaction of the two (sub)goals on the basis of the individual value of the two (sub)goals. Call it *‘the weighing value dilemma’*. As I explain below, the first horn is outright implausible while the second horn, as it stands, fails to make any progress against the James problem. I go on to tentatively suggest a way to make progress against the James problem via the second horn by appealing to the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia. But for now let us turn to the implausible first horn of the dilemma.

**3 Weighing Epistemic Value\Goals: Truth-Acquisition or Falsity-Avoidance?**

In light of the first horn of the weighing value dilemma, two rival policies of belief-fixation emerge: either we assume that truth-acquisition completely trumps falsity-avoidance or the opposite. Depending on how we weigh and prioritize the value of these epistemic (sub)goals, we get different normative incentives about how we ought to proceed with belief-fixation.

The problem, however, is that no matter how we weigh between the two (sub)goals, it turns out that it is implausible to prioritize one (sub)goal at the complete expense of the other because in both cases we end up with very implausible pictures of belief-fixation.[[15]](#footnote-15) In effect, as we shall see in a moment, the first horn of the dilemma is so implausible that seems hopeless as a possible way of addressing the James problem. For the sake of ease of exposition, let us call the goal that is prioritized at the complete expense of the other goal ‘*dominant’*.

If we consider truth-acquisition as the dominant goal, then the best policy in promoting this goal would be to lower so much epistemic standards of justification so that they virtually become nonexistent and we believe just anything on the basis of no evidence at all, even considered outright contradictions [(sub) p(b\e)=0]. If we believe all propositions we come across, then we would have as many true beliefs as possible, but also as many false beliefs as possible. But given that truth-acquisition is the dominant goal, the implication of having many false beliefs would be entirely epistemically innocuous because the sole epistemic value\goal is truth-acquisition.[[16]](#footnote-16) For obvious reasons, call this picture of belief-fixation *‘epistemic licentiousness’*.

Unfortunately, epistemic licentiousness is implausible. Very briefly, here are some reasons that suggest its implausibility. First, if we assume that true belief is the norm of practical reasoning, epistemic licentiousness would entail a cognitive clutter of sorts in terms of practical reasoning. If all beliefs are considered true, it is unclear how we can have practical reasoning at all because all relevant beliefs would seem equally good in promoting the satisfaction of our practical goals.

Suppose that I would like to go for a stroll and I have many -considered- true beliefs about which places are suitable for a nice stroll and I also have many -considered- true beliefs about how to decide between these many suitable locations. On the face of it, it seems that I would be at a loss about how to deliberate about the matter because all my relevant beliefs are considered justified and true, even contradictory ones. Like Buridan’s ass, practical paralysis seems to ensue in such a bizarre scenario, which also explains why Darwinian evolution has not designed our cognitive faculties in such a hopeless way. We wouldn’t survive, reproduce and perpetuate the species.

Second, the picture of belief-fixation that epistemic licentiousness portrays seems entirely psychologically unrealistic, plausibly again for evolutionary reasons. Psychologically speaking, it is very hard to envisage that we could just believe anything at will, especially if we take into consideration that belief-fixation is not usually under our direct voluntary control. So, even if we ought to believe just anything, we cannot really do so.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Third, it seems clearly irrational to believe on the basis of [(sub) p(b\e)≤0.51], or even plain contradictions [(sub) [p(b\e)=0], and surely we would like to pursue policies of belief-fixation that satisfy such basic constraints of epistemic rationality (i.e. logical and probabilistic coherence) . Yet epistemic licentiousness licenses believing just anything and breaches even such basic constraints of rationality. This is so because if the [(sub) pr (b)= 0.7], then rationally the [(sub) pr(-b)=0.3] and we would believe both of these according to epistemic licentiousness, even considered contradictions with [(sub) pr (b)=0], which is clearly irrational by any plausible standard of rationality.[[18]](#footnote-18) I conclude that epistemic licentiousness is an implausible picture of belief-fixation.

But we could still set as a dominant goal the alternative goal of falsity-avoidance. That is, if we inversely consider falsity-avoidance as the dominant goal, then the best policy in promoting this goal would be to raise epistemic standards of justification to the ultimate point of deduction\indefeasibility and believe just what is considered deductively proved [(sub) p(b\e)=1]. If we believe only deductively proved propositions, then we would have as few false beliefs as possible, but also very few true beliefs.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A fortiori, we could even suggest that because our deductive reasoning sometimes slips and is fallacious\fallible and, inevitably, this would bestow us with some false beliefs that perhaps we should believe nothing at all! Given that falsity-avoidance is the dominant goal, the implication of having no (true) beliefs would be entirely epistemically innocuous because the sole epistemic value\goal is falsity-avoidance. For obvious reasons, call this picture of belief fixation *‘epistemic asceticism’*.

Unfortunately, again, epistemic asceticism is very implausible. Very briefly, here are three reasons that support its implausibility. First, epistemic asceticism entails some form of very radical scepticism because we would be licensed to believe very, very few propositions, if any at all. Perhaps we would be licensed to believe some logical, mathematical, modal beliefs and some other classes of beliefs that may exemplify the very demanding property of indefeasible justification. At any rate, this class of beliefs would represent only a very small portion of what sort of beliefs we hold in our everyday doxastic life (perceptual, memorial, inductive, introspective, testimonial etc.). Note also that this is a very strong form of scepticism because it is scepticism not just about knowledge but about justified belief.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Second, again, this picture of belief-fixation is psychologically unrealistic, plausibly for evolutionary reasons. Psychologically speaking, it is very hard to envisage that we could just restrain belief to the minimum of deductive proof, or even completely withhold belief. Many of our cognitive faculties, processes or abilities have evolved to produce belief-output in a spontaneous and unreflective way (perceptual, memorial, introspective etc.) and of course this belief-output is often quite reliable, something that lends some intuitive support to externalist theories of justification\knowledge.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Third, suppose that epistemic asceticism is right in spite of its psychological extravagance and implausibility. This would mean, again, that practical paralysis would ensue because we would have very few beliefs to rely on for our everyday practical deliberations. Deductive reasoning is mostly applicable to a priori beliefs (logic, mathematics, modality etc.), and it is very hard to envisage how we could rely on just a priori beliefs for our everyday practical deliberations. Thus, epistemic asceticism also seems implausible.

I hasten to conclude that we cannot resolve the James problem via the first horn of the weighing value approach, be it via epistemic licentiousness or epistemic asceticism. Weighing and prioritizing the promotion of one dominant (sub)goal over the other will not tackle the problem. But we still have the option of the second horn at our disposal. Besides, why think that weighing the two goals should be an all-or-nothing affair? We may reasonably surmise that we need not prioritize the one (sub)goal at the complete expense of the other and that a (sub)goal need not be dominant. We could, in principle, strike just the right kind of balance between the two (sub)goals.

Moreover, the second horn bears some intuitive appeal because compromising goals is what we often try to do when we have conflicting practical goals of individual value that we cannot both satisfy to the same extent at the same time. Think of the ice cream example again. One way to reconcile the two conflicting desires is to have an ice cream of low sugars. So we both satisfy the desire for ice-cream and the desire for a healthy diet.

Or think of the football analogy. One way to reconcile offensive\defensive tactics is to try to strike some kind of right balance between the two, so that we reconcile the two goals. Instead of playing the more defensive formation of 5-3-2 or the more offensive 4-3-3 you could play the more balanced 4-4-2. So if we want to balance our footballing practical goals, we change the tactical formation of our team. Now, the train of thought is that given that both practical and epistemic goals share structural similarities, the same reconciliation strategy could in principle carry over from practical to epistemic goals.[[22]](#footnote-22) The obvious question is how should *principled* balancing go in the epistemic case?[[23]](#footnote-23)

**4 Aristotelian Eudaimonia and Evidential Understanding**

Thus far we have argued that the two (sub)goals are in tension and taking one (sub)goal as dominant delivers very implausible policies of belief-fixation. As a result we are forced into the second horn of the dilemma and we are in essence stuck with the initial puzzle. How are we to correctly regulate belief-fixation given that the two (sub)goals are in competition?

Thinking about the football analogy might give us some hints about how to address the question. In the case of the football analogy, we shift the tactical formation of the team in virtue of an overarching goal, namely, the goal of winning matches. So, the ultimate goal of final value, at least in professional football, is winning matches (and consequently trophies) and constitutes the external criterion that guides our balancing between offensive\epistemic tactics.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The parallel line of thought in the epistemic case would be that to strike the right kind of balance between the two (sub)goals, we also need some sort of external criterion in virtue of which we could non-arbitrarily balance the relative satisfaction of the two (sub)goals. Given that what we weigh here are goals of epistemic value, one may suspect that we should approach the problem from the perspective of more general (epistemic) value considerations. After all, this is what we do in the football game that seems sufficiently analogous to the epistemic game, namely, we appeal to the overarching goal\value of winning matches. By parity of reasoning, if there is an ultimate (epistemic) goal of greater value, then we can perhaps appeal to that goal and use it as an external criterion for a judicious adjudication of the matter.

This intuitive, teleological line of reasoning is broadly Aristotelian in origin. Famously, Aristotle thought that there is an ultimately final goal (or ‘telos’) about human life, namely, eudaimonia (living well or flourishing)[[25]](#footnote-25) and that this goal can shed light in value questions.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is so because eudaimonia is the goal determining how we should lead our lives, tout court, and our epistemic lives are no exception to this**.** Due to lack of space,I will not argue for the Aristotelian position here but take it for granted for the sake of the argument.[[27]](#footnote-27) I will be assuming that eudaimonia is our ultimately final[[28]](#footnote-28) goal and, hence, to the extent that we are rational agents we should be aiming at living well and be doing what we can to live well (morally, epistemically, aesthetically, politically or otherwise).

Once this Aristotelian, teleological assumption is in place we can revisit the problem of balancing the two (sub)goals of inquiry with some perspective. This is so because if eudaimonia is the ultimately final goal any other interim (epistemic or non-epistemic) goal must be to some extent instrumental to the promotion of eudaimonia.[[29]](#footnote-29) So, we could appeal to eudaimonia in order to balance the two (sub)goals of inquiry and indicate that the right way to balance the two (sub)goals is the way that best promotes good living.

Obviously, this is not much of progress yet because we have not answered the question about what kind of balancing would best promote eudaimonia. Both (sub)goals are valuable and therefore should both be taken into consideration. Besides, as we have seen, if we set a dominant goal and belief-fixation is driven solely either by truth-acquisition or by falsity-avoidance we end up with bizarre and implausible pictures of belief-fixation. The obvious question now is how we can take both valuable (sub)goals into consideration in the right way in order to promote the final goal of eudaimonia.

Given that the individual value of both (sub)goals should be taken into relative consideration, some theoretical space might open if we drop the assumption that belief-fixation should be regulated by an atomistic epistemic goal.[[30]](#footnote-30) An *atomistic* epistemic goalis a goal that sets a goal for individual beliefs, not for whole sets of beliefs. Call this latter epistemic goal *holistic.[[31]](#footnote-31) [[32]](#footnote-32)*

The idea is that theoretical space might open if we shift from atomistic to holistic epistemic goals because holistic goals are goals for whole sets of beliefs and this allows for balancing the two (sub)goals in a way that atomistic goals do not. Atomistic goals simply set goals for individual beliefs and it is hard to see how the two (sub)goals can be balanced if we are solely considering the goals for an individual belief. For either you go for the truth of an individual belief or for avoiding its falsity and no balancing is involved. In contrast, if we are considering the goals for whole sets of beliefs, we can in principle balance the two (sub)goals because whole sets of beliefs allow for taking into consideration different (sub)goals at the same time.

Now, in response to the puzzle, we could propose that a holistic epistemic goal could be suggested as an overarching goal that can strike the right kind of balance between the two (sub)goals because it promotes the ultimate goal of eudaimonia. A goal that could play this role is what I shall call ‘*evidential understanding’*. I will fist introduce the rudiments of the holistic goal of evidential understanding and afterwards undertake to explain how it can take both (sub)goals into consideration in a balanced way that promotes eudaimonia.

Roughly, evidential understanding is the view that the final goal of inquiry is holistic, not atomistic, and should offer an evidence-based conception of the wider and more comprehensive picture of how (sets of) beliefs probabilistically inter-support each other**.** Broadly construed, it is to be understood in terms of evidentialist and coherentist lines.[[33]](#footnote-33) We should form beliefs in a way that is sensitive to relevant and available evidence and in a way that promotes the explanatory coherence links between the agent’s beliefs, where these links are to be understood in terms of inferential and probabilistic inter-support.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Admittedly, I cannot even begin to delineate the basics of evidentialist understanding because this would require lengthy excursions into the intricate notions of evidence, coherence and probability (and even more!) and due to space restrictions this will have to wait. All I can afford to describe here are some of the basic contours of evidentialist understanding which are the following.

First, evidential understanding is a species of understanding-why in the sense that the probabilistic and inferential inter-support of the beliefs help us explain phenomena and answer relevant why-questions. For example, a coherent set of beliefs about economic theory might help explain why many western capitalist economies are currently experiencing difficulties (recession, deflation, unemployment etc.). The economic theory in play might be Marxist, Keynesian or Classical but the important thing is that it should be evidentially supported. Of course, these coherent economic beliefs, even if they are evidentially supported, they need not be true. This leads to the second point.

Second, evidential understanding is also to be distinguished from factive conceptions of understanding.[[35]](#footnote-35) Evidential understanding need not entail truth. For all the relevant evidenceat our disposal, even if we correctly grasp what this evidence rationally supports, it may fail to lead to the truth. That is, even if we believe as we rationally ought to believe in the circumstances, given the evidence, we may fail to get at the truth. But evidential understanding does imply that in non-demonically-skeptical worlds we should, in principle, be in better contact with reality.[[36]](#footnote-36) If we weigh the evidence correctly and grasp what it rationally supports, it is likely that a fair number of our beliefs will be true and inter-supporting and therefore improve our understanding of reality, even if strict truth on the matter remains as elusive as ever. This is because rational belief is, ceteris paribus, truth-conducive.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Third, talk of evidential understanding should not mistake it for an inevitably internalist conception of understanding, no matter how internalism is to be glossed.[[38]](#footnote-38) True enough, notions like evidence, probability and coherence are often (and perhaps more naturally) explicated along internalist lines but an internalist construal is not inescapable.[[39]](#footnote-39) It could well be the case that evidentialist understanding relies on an externalist conception of evidence, probability and coherence.[[40]](#footnote-40) For current purposes, I cannot dwell on the murky internalism\externalism contention and I will leave it open about what sort of metaepistemological interpretation is the most plausible.

In the same vein, the coherentist framework of evidential understanding comports well with the Quinean idea that one’s web of belief should be under continuous revision and reconstruction in light of what new evidence supports (or even new and improved assessments of what old evidence may support).[[41]](#footnote-41) This continuous reworking could be carried out either along internalist or externalist (or even hybrid) lines that, unfortunately, we don’t have the space now to spell out in much detail, not to mention arbitrate which one is our favourite.

It could, for example, be carried out along deontological lines or reliabilist lines. On the one hand, it could be carried out in line with internalist contours and in terms of rational epistemic duties about what one ought to believe, given the available and relevant evidence. On the other hand, it could be carried out in line with externalist contours and in terms of reliable virtuous dispositions for belief-fixation. It could even build on both internalist and externalist insights in order to construct a kind of hybrid theoretical framework.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Fourth, to repeat, evidential understanding is an attainable, final epistemic goal in regard to interim, instrumental epistemic goals like atomistic truth-acquisition\falsity-avoidance. However, in the ascending ladder of value hierarchy, it is again an instrumental goal in regard to the ultimately final goal of eudaimonia(or human flourishing). Further, one may ponder about the value of the Big Truth (and Knowledge) and their place in this hierarchy. Suffice it to say here that they are nothing but elusive, unattainable goals. Given the often fragmentary (and sometimes even tempered with) character of evidence, the difficulty of the subjects of inquiry and human cognitive frailty (e.g. confirmation biases and other irrationalities like the affect heuristic or the halo effect, deep-seated vicious character traits like narrow-mindedness, social and situational pressures etc.) it is rather unlikely that we will find the truth about all the matters that really interest us.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Fifth, it should not be assumed that we can somehow set up a certain fixed and rigid (perhaps even quantified) balance between the (sub)goals of truth-acquisition\falsity-avoidance that best promotes evidential understanding, which in its own turn promotes eudaimonia. The balance between the two goals may be context-sensitive and flexible enough to fluctuate in certain contexts of inquiry. Epistemic life is messy and in some epistemic contexts the best way to promote evidential understanding may be to confer some relative priority to truth-acquisition over falsity avoidance and vice versa.

In some contexts, inquiry might be sensitive to practical interests, needs and stakes and these may affect how the exact balancing of the two (sub)goals should go. We may, for instance, give some relative priority to avoiding falsity in contexts where falsity might incur disastrous practical repercussions (e.g. when battling steep economic recession) and we may give some relative priority to acquiring truth in contexts where the truth would incur beneficent practical repercussions (e.g. when battling cancer or Ebola).[[44]](#footnote-44)

The same happens in the case of the football game. In certain football contexts where you have to play away with a gifted, technically superior team you should adapt your tactics in order to promote the practical goal of winning matches. For instance, you could opt for a more defensive formation that looks for the opportunity to strike in the counterattack, knowing that a more offensive tactic will expose the team to a humiliating defeat. Equally, in a different occasion you could opt for a more offensive formation that intends to dominate the game, knowing that a more defensive tactic will grant gratuitous freedom of offensive action to a team that is less gifted than your team.

Sixth, obviously, not all infinity of propositions are, or should be, or could be, of equal interest to us and of equal value to know.[[45]](#footnote-45) There are pointless propositions that one, ceteris paribus, ought not to care about like how many blades of grass there are in the backyard or how many grains of sand there are on a sandy beach. This brings forth the interesting question of what propositions one ought to be interested in. We can afford the brief note that at least one ought to be interested in propositions bearing on the ultimate goal of living well. So, one should have some interest in political philosophy, for example, about the right way to structure a political community (and key political concepts like social justice, liberty, equality etc.) because the question of how to structure a political community directly bears on the question of living well.

With this basic outline of how eudaimonia could be invoked as the external criterion in virtue of which we can balance the two (sub)goals (by means of intermediate reference to evidential understanding), let us now turn to the question of how exactly evidential understanding promotes eudaimonia. As I argue in a moment, it does so by promoting what I shall call ‘*theoretical minimal wisdom’*.

**5 Evidential Understanding and Theoretical Minimal Wisdom**

Evidential understanding is an interim final goal, though, instrumental goal in regard to eudaimonia because it promotes the satisfaction of the ultimate goal of eudaimonia. If you satisfy the goal of evidential understanding you inevitably promote the goal of eudaimonia because it promotes theoretical minimal wisdom that seems a necessary condition for eudaimonia**.** Let us explain a bit what theoretical minimal wisdom is, how evidential understanding promotes it and how theoretical minimal wisdom promotes eudaimonia.

With theoretical minimal wisdom I stipulate the cognitive state (or condition) in which (a) an agent forms a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things about all that should interest her as a rational agent (a Weltanschauung, if you like) and (b) the agent is humble, reflective and open-minded enough to be aware of the fact that her Weltanschauung is just one out of many evidence-based and coherent ones and, therefore, is possible, if not likely, not to be true, at least not true in all respects.[[46]](#footnote-46) I call it ‘theoretical minimal wisdom’ because it specifies a minimal necessary condition of being (theoretically) wise.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Satisfying these two necessary conditions does not imply full wisdom per se, whatever this might mean, but solely implies a minimal state of wisdom.[[48]](#footnote-48) Evidential understanding promotes theoretical minimal wisdom because we expect minimally wise agents to have a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things and a humbling sense of their fallibility. That is, a systematic, comprehensive, explanatory, evidence-based and coherent worldview that helps agents find their place in the world by reflecting on core life-changing questions like ‘How should I live?’, ‘What am I?’, ‘What do I owe to others, if anything?’, ‘What should I believe?’ etc.[[49]](#footnote-49)

To illustrate the fact that evidential understanding promotes theoretical minimal wisdom consider the following simple thought experiment. Suppose a possible world very close and thereby very similar to our actual world. Agents in this world have the same biology, psychology, linguistic and cognitive abilities, social life settings etc. with us humans. Now, in such a world would you consider someone (theoretically) wise at all if he lacked a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things that includes such life-changing matters as politics, morality, art, science, religion etc.? I think that most of us would consider such a person (theoretically) unwise because of his unreflective naivety.

Suppose now that in the same possible world we do have an agent with a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things that includes such life-changing matters as politics, morality, art, science, religion etc. Would this agent display (theoretical minimal) wisdom? I think not necessarily because there could be cases where such an agent is dogmatic, arrogant and complacent enough to consider her own Weltanschauung the Truth. Think, for example, of the occasional Marxist, Freudian, libertarian etc. who complacently believes that her Weltanschauung is the Truth. In that case, I think most people would not attribute (theoretical) wisdom because it seems incongruent with dogmatism, arrogance and complacency.[[50]](#footnote-50) This need not imply that a person who satisfies the two proposed conditions enjoys the exalted status of being fully wise but s\he at least satisfies necessary conditions for wisdom that we have dubbed the conditions of theoretical minimal wisdom.

This simple duo of thought experiments indicates that evidential understanding and a humbling sense of our fallibility are necessary conditions for theoretical minimal wisdom and promote it. An analogous duo of thought experiments can also be run to indicate that theoretical minimal wisdom is a necessary condition for eudaimonia (or a good life) and promotes it.

Suppose, again, a possible world very close and thereby very similar to our actual world. Agents have the same biology, psychology, linguistic and cognitive abilities, social life settings etc. with us humans. Now, in such a world would you consider someone having a good life at all if he lacked (a) a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things that includes such life-changing matters as politics, morality, art, science, religion etc., and (b) a humbling sense of her fallibility that jointly confer (theoretical minimal) wisdom?[[51]](#footnote-51) I think that most of us would consider such an unreflective and naive person, not only unwise, but a person that does not enjoy a really good life.[[52]](#footnote-52)

As Socrates would have it, ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ in the sense that it is a life that does not rise up to the level of reflective scrutiny and theoretical minimal wisdom.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is not a life lived in thorough examination as it could and should be. Of course, this need not imply that the minimally reflective person enjoys a fully good life, whatever this might exactly mean.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Suppose now that in the same possible world we do have an agent with a certain evidence-based and coherent understanding of the bigger picture of things that includes such life-changing matters as politics, morality, art, science, religion etc. Would this agent have a good life at all? I think not necessarily because there could be cases where such an agent is dogmatic, arrogant and complacent enough to consider her own Weltanschauung the Truth. Think again of the occasional Marxist, Freudian, libertarian etc. who complacently believes that her Weltanschauung is the Truth. In that case, I think most people would not attribute having a good life to the agent because a good life seems incongruent with dogmatism, arrogance and complacency. A life lived in dogmatic certainties, complacency and, inevitably, accompanied with arrogance and perhaps even utter disrespect for other evidence-based, coherent systems of belief is intuitively lacking in value.

What is more, evidential understanding and a humbling sense of our fallibility seem to cultivate exactly the wisdom-conducive virtues of epistemic humility, tolerance and open-mindedness that are the opposites of vices like arrogance, intolerance and narrow-mindedness that dogmatic, arrogant and complacent agents tend to exhibit.[[55]](#footnote-55) It does so because it eschews dogmatic insistence on truth, certainty and knowledge but on having a rational, evidential understanding while conceding that we may don’t have, and may not ever be able to have, the elusive and perhaps unattainable Big Truth (and Knowledge) about all the things that should interest us.[[56]](#footnote-56)

I conclude that evidential understanding and a humbling sense of our fallibility are necessary conditions for theoretical minimal wisdom and promote it and theoretical minimal wisdom is a necessary condition for eudaimonia and promotes it. This is how evidential understanding balances the Janus-faced goal of truth-acquisition and falsity-avoidance in light of the ultimate goal of having a good life.

**6 Conclusion**

I have presented a puzzle about epistemic normativity, the so-called James problem. The James problem indicates that the standard conception of the goal of inquiry as the pursuit of truth-acquisition and falsity-avoidance induces tension between the two (sub)goals because they are inversely proportionate: the more we satisfy the one the less we satisfy the other and vice versa. I suggested that we could follow a weighing value approach to the James problem, namely, that we weigh the relative epistemic value of each (sub)goal and accordingly regulate belief-fixation.

The weighing value approach then ushered us into the horns of a dilemma: either the value of one of the two (sub)goals completely trumps the value of the other (sub)goal; or we can somehow balance and reconcile the value of the two (sub)goals without either of the two becoming dominant. The first horn of the dilemma was found very implausible. Whether we go solely for truth-acquisition or for falsity-avoidance, we end up with respective policies of belief-fixation (epistemic licentiousness\epistemic asceticism) that are bizarre and implausible.

The second horn of the dilemma was found more promising as we invoked an external criterion in virtue of which we can indicate a principled way to balance and reconcile the satisfaction of the two (sub)goals. I suggested that this external criterion is the ultimate goal of eudaimonia and that eudaimonic considerations imply that a more holistic epistemic goal may help open theoretical space for balancing the two (sub)goals. This more holistic goal is what I have called evidential understanding. Evidential understanding promotes eudaimonia because it promotes what I have called theoretical minimal wisdom, which is a necessary condition for eudaimonia and promotes it.

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2. See, for example, Foley (1987), Alston (1988), Sosa (2003) and Elgin (2004). For a list of epistemologists that rather unreflectively subscribe to the standard conception see Piller (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Foley (1987), Alston (1988), Kelly (2003), Wedgwood (2008) and Zagzebski (2009) for brief airings of the James insight. For notable exceptions that do discuss the James insight at some length see Riggs (2003) and Piller (2009). As Piller (2009:193-5) notes, the standard goal of inquiry may be formally represented in terms of the biconditional desire to (Bp if and only if p). This breaks up into two conditionals that reveal the dual nature of the standard goal: (a) desire that (if p to believe that p) and (b) desire to (believe p if p). The first world-to-mind conditional reveals our interest in getting at the truth and the second mind-to-world conditional reveals our interest in being right about our beliefs and avoiding falsity. As Piller argues, it is the first conditional that lies at the heart of rational cognitive endeavors and not the latter. The latter only reflects our dogmatic proclivities in being right, in bending the world to our will, which is of course epistemically culpable. This, of course, leaves open the question of the James problem, something that Piller (2009) is sensitive to. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Compare James (1896\2008: 109): ‘There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion- ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth*; and *we must avoid error*- these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws’ (James’ own emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some may harbour legitimate worries about how much we can control and influence our belief-fixation processes, habits etc. given that they are largely, directly involuntary (cf. Alston (1988), Feldman (2001)). For the purposes of this article I set aside questions of doxastic (in)voluntarism, control and responsibility and I assume that there is at least some doxastic control that suffices to rescue doxastic responsibility. For one thing, if we had no control (direct or indirect) whatsoever on belief-fixation, we would not be in the business of doing normative epistemology because the whole cognitive endeavour would have been useless and worthless. We would simply be victims of our belief-fixation processes without being able to do anything to enhance our cognitive condition. But, of course, normative epistemology is not useless and worthless. Be that as it may, this is a question for another day. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Zagzebski (2009:141-2) suggests that different historical periods of philosophy were driven by different epistemic goals. Some periods were driven by the threat of skepticism and focused on goals like knowledge and certainty, while other periods were driven by the quest for explanation and focused on understanding. According to Zagzebski, Descartes is an example of the former drive and Plato of the latter. Even if Zagzebski is right, however, there is little doubt that modern epistemology has been determinately Cartesian and preoccupied with knowledge and the menace of skepticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Without being anything close to an expert in Jamesian exegesis, here is one possible reading of James (1896\2008). He is criticizing Clifford (1877\2008) and his famous paper as being too epistemically reluctant or passive because he prioritizes the goal of falsity-avoidance over the goal of truth-acquisition. That is, epistemically passive in the sense that he is not willing to believe anything without ‘sufficient evidence’. There is nothing wrong with having ‘sufficient evidence’, says James, but this would leave us with very few beliefs and this cannot be made to work. We cannot just live our lives in the fear of being duped. We also have to pursue the truth and have a workable web of belief to rely on. For this reason, we should relax a bit (but not of course abandon) our notion of sufficiency of evidence. Believing is not just about falsity-avoidance but also about truth-acquisition for clearly practical reasons. Hence, we arrive at the James problem about how to regulate belief-fixation. This evidentialist construal of James contrasts with the nonevidentialist that takes James to be arguing for the justification of belief even in the absence of sufficient evidence in its favor. The nonevidentialist reading of James is quite popular and can be found, for instance, in Blackburn (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Riggs (2003), Kelly (2003) and Wedgwood (2008) for airing the point. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This reads as ‘subjective probability of belief on the given evidence’. For some discussion of the subjective interpretation of probability see Mellor (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I understand justification as truth-conducive, which can be spelled out in terms of increase of the likelihood for truth. This is a quite common idea about justification. See Fumerton (1995) for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is so because if we are the victims of an evil demon scenario (or some such skeptical scenario), then obviously in spite of our best cognitive efforts we may have almost no true beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I clarify that football is merely conventional because the epistemic game may very well not be just a conventional game or activity. Epistemic realists who insist on the mind-independence of epistemic facts would deny this, for example, and insist that the epistemic game in not merely an activity regulated by socially constructed epistemic facts. See for example Boghossian (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Papineau (2003) and Griffiths and Wilkins (forthcoming) for the fast-and-frugal adaptive pressures on cognition that may have shaped our suboptimal but good enough for survival and reproduction cognitive abilities, processes etc.. Intuitively, the epistemic tradeoff between truth-acquisition and falsity-avoidance would have been (and probably has been) necessary for the survival and reproduction of the species. As will become obvious in a moment, humanoids with -what I shall call- ‘dominant goals’ of either truth-acquisition or falsity-avoidance would have dim chances of survival and reproduction. So, given the evolutionary pedigree of cognition, cognition operates as it should be. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Compare Zagzebski (2009:18): ‘We want to avoid both ignorance about important matters and error about such matters. It is not at all obvious how to balance the two strategies’. Note that she speaks in terms of avoiding ignorance instead of truth-acquisition, but this is entirely innocuous because avoiding ignorance entails truth-acquisition and vice versa. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Alston (1988) and Piller (2009) for brief airings of the same point. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There is a subtle relationship between something being a goal and being valuable. Given that (a) intentional action is goal-orientated and that (b) if we are rational we opt for intentional action that appears to us under-the-guise-of-the-good, it follows that the goals that orientate our under-the-guise-of-the-good intentional action should be taken to be valuable. This is why I place epistemic value and goal side by side. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This result would seem to breach the plausible normative principle that ‘rational ought implies can’. The principle, roughly, suggests that to rationally ought to exhibit a certain kind of conduct (epistemic or practical) you must be able to exhibit such conduct. By contraposition, if you can’t exhibit such conduct for whatever reasons, then you are not rationally bound to act accordingly. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This point is slightly exaggerated because there may be exceptions to even such basic constraints of rationality. If, for example, the concept of truth is indispensable for a web of belief and this concept is necessarily incoherent because of self-referential semantic paradoxes (like the liar), we would still have good reasons to employ the concept of truth. Thus, the principles may be only defeasible and hold for the most part. See Harman (1986:15-7) for some discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Assuming here that our subjective credences are reliably tracking deductive relations, of course. Of note, is that there have been philosophers who have endorsed such a demanding conception of justification. Fogelin (1994), for example, has argued that only deductive justification could address the Gettier problem and if this ushers to skepticism, then so be it. He accepts some form of Pyrrhonist skepticism. For a more recent defense of a version of skeptical invariantism see Kyriacou (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Fumerton (1995: Ch. 1) for some discussion of why skepticism about justified belief is much more radical than skepticism about knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Again, this seems to breach the plausible normative principle that ‘rational ought implies can’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For one thing, they both seem to be normative goals in the sense that they should guide our practical and epistemic lives correctly, whatever correctness might mean. For the idea that the moral and the epistemic domain share important structural similarities see Zagzebski (1996) and Cuneo (2007). It is surely not accidental that expressivism has recently been transposed from metaethics to metaepistemology. For the transposition see Chrisman (2007) about knowledge and Kyriacou (2012) about epistemic justification. For a defense of Cuneo’s structural parity claim about the moral and the epistemic see Cuneo and Kyriacou (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Of note, is that the same kind of question, namely, how to balance inversely proportionate goals is found in debates of military strategy. For example, Wellington is typically considered a master of defensive strategy and Napoleon of offensive strategy and opinions about who was the better commander diverge. Perhaps opinions diverge partly because some prioritize defensive strategy while others offensive strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ideally, athletic values like fair play and sportsmanship should also be goals but for the sake of the analogy I ignore such complications. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a-5a). There is some interpretive dispute about how to exactly gloss the classical Greek notion of eudaimonia. Some translate it as human flourishing, success, well-being or happiness but none of these really captures the exact meaning of the Classical Greek for reasons we need not dwell on here. Perhaps what comes close is ‘good life’ or ‘living well’. For this reason many commentators insist on the transliterated usage of the Classical Greek word. This is the policy I will also follow in the text. For some discussion of the notion of eudaimonia see Shields (2007: 310-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Of note, is that eudaimonia should not be identified as a distinctively and exclusively moral goal (at least by my lights). It might be a broad practical goal that involves moral, political, epistemic, aesthetic etc. (sub)goals. On this way of construing eudaimonia, the proposal should not be mistaken as aiming at reducing the epistemic to the moral, although the two domains bear obvious normative inter-connections (cf. Clifford (1877); Zagzebski (1996); Cuneo (2007); Baehr (2012)). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For a defense of the application of the teleological, Aristotelian position on questions of (moral\political) value see Sandel (2010: Chs 8,9, 10). Sandel’s (2010) case could be extended to the case of epistemic value in pretty much the spirit of the current work, but this is something that will have to wait for another occasion. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I specify that eudaimonia is the ‘ultimately final’ goal because, as Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics (*?)) himself pointed out, there are also *interim* final goals like friendship and love. Friendship might be valuable for its own sake, but it is also a constitutive part of eudaimonia and thereby promotes it. I had some difficulties in pinning down this reference in Aristotle’s work, though I am relatively confident that there is such a reference in his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For the idea that epistemic values (or goods) should promote eudaimonia see also Zagzebski (2003). Talk of ‘promotion’ should not invite a consequentialist reading but, in true Aristotelian spirit, a primarily constitutive reading. Positive consequences might tend to follow from epistemic values but this is not to identify epistemic values with those consequences. The distinction is subtle but important. See Sandel (2010) for a similar point. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Riggs (2003) for a similar idea. Piller (2009), although argues that truth-acquisition and not falsity-avoidance should be our primary goal, he is also sensitive to the challenge posed by the James problem. As a response to the challenge, he suggests that we have (and should have) a desire to avoid inconsistencies. One could see that both Riggs and Piller’s responses to the James problem converge towards the line I pursue here. In fact, I think the account proposed here complements and improves on their proposals on a number of counts. I can’t really engage in contrastive discussion here with these two theories but, for one thing, these two theories do not appeal to the notions of minimal wisdom and eudaimonia as the account on offer here does. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Holistic goals have been generally ignored in the history of epistemology. For some discussion of the point see Zagzebski (1996: Part I). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. One might object here that by appealing to holistic and not atomistic goals, we are in essence, changing the initial Jamesian question of how to balance the two competing subgoals. In response, this worry is unfounded because, although we might be appealing to extraneous third goals, we do so in order to address the initial Jamesian problem. Note also that the problem seems insoluble, unless we appeal to some other goal in virtue of which we can balance them. Indeed, this is a broadly Sellarsian\Hegelian ‘semantic holism’ insight. Individual beliefs can never be understood and evaluated atomistically but always holistically in light of background beliefs. If this is the case, then epistemic goals should also be holistic in tandem. Brandom (2000; 2010) typically defends such holistic ideas and, of course, Quine (1953; 1992) has also propounded them. Such ideas can be traced back to Hegel (1910\2003) and Sellars (1956\1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Feldman’s and Connee’s evidentialism (2004) seems to bear important similarities with the account outlined here. But there are also important differences that I cannot now really pursue. For one thing, the account here need not subscribe to their mentalist internalist account of justification. Clifford (1877) was also an evidentialist of sorts. At any rate, this is a story for another occasion. Also, for some sympathetic discussion of the notion of explanatory coherence see Harman (1986: Ch.7). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Fumerton (1995:146-7) about why the coherence relation should not be understood in terms of the austere, deductive material implication. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Recently there has been a lot of discussion about the nature of understanding that I have to skip here. See Zagzebski (1996, 2009), Kvanvig (2003), Elgin (2004), Grim (2010) and Pritchard (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The idea that understanding is in this way truth-conducive is supported by philosophers like Riggs (2003) and Elgin (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. It is truth-conducive in ‘normal’, demon-proof worlds. I employ the concept of ‘normal worlds’ here. Normal worlds are worlds pretty much close and thereby similar to the actual world (that is commonsensically assumed to be real). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. That is, be it in terms of accessibility internalism, mentalist internalism, or even other. For the various takes on epistemic internalism see Pappas (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Fumerton (1995: Ch.5), Pollock and Cruz (1999: Ch.3)) and Olson (2007) for the concept of coherence and its intricacies. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See for example how Greco (2010) develops an externalist account of such notions. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Quine (1953; 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Such a hybrid account has been developed, for example, by Sosa (1991, 2007). Sosa distinguishes between virtue-theoretic reliable knowledge that is merely ‘apt’ and reflective knowledge that is also coherent. Reflective knowledge is the distinctively human kind of knowledge, while apt knowledge the merely animal kind of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For some fascinating empirical work on the psychology of judgment that illustrates our cognitive frailty see Kahneman (2011). Of course, as Kahneman (2011) underlines, human cognition is not just capable of ‘flaws’ but also of ‘marvels’. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Like knowledge attributions (cf. DeRose (1996) and Cohen (1998), the exact balancing of the two (sub)goals may fluctuate because it is sensitive to contextual factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. As Harman (1986:15) notes, as rational and cognitively finite believers we should aim at cognitive clutter-avoidance. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The (b) condition bears out the intuition well-known from the epistemology of disagreement debates that disagreement with respected and reliable peers should somewhat mitigate one’s confidence in one’s (web of) belief and invite reflection and reconsideration of the reasons we have for this (web of) belief. This is not to imply that mere peer disagreement should usher an agent to fall back to anything so radical as suspense of judgment or abandoning the belief. We may esteem and trust our peers and take seriously their argued views but we should also esteem and trust ourselves and our own argued views. Anyway, this goes far beyond the scope of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. From Aristotle onwards (cf. Zagzebski (1996), Whticomb (2011)), we tend to distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom. I set aside here the distinction and the relation between the two according to the present account. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ryan (2013) calls this general conception of wisdom ‘the epistemic humility theory of wisdom’. Note also that my take on theoretical minimal wisdom is very different from Ryan’s (2013) exposition of humility accounts. It is rather more akin to Zagzebski’s (1996: 49-50) ‘grasping the whole structure of reality’ understanding of wisdom and Whitcomb’s ‘deep understanding’ version of theoretical wisdom, though, very important differences remain that I cannot delve into here. See also Whitcomb (2011) for some useful discussion of the complexities besetting the concept of wisdom. Shane ryan [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. It should not be assumed that theoretical minimal wisdom is overly intellectualistic in the sense that only philosophers, intellectuals, artists, scientists etc. can be minimally wise. Laypeople can in principle also be philosophically refined to some extent and therefore minimally wise. It sometimes can be surprising how sensitive laypeople are to fundamental philosophical questions that remain questions for all (e.g. the moral question of the right thing to do, God’s existence, social justice, aesthetic value, even composition and identity etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Of note is that intellectual vices (naivety, arrogance, complacency etc.) seem to appear in an explanation of our intuitions in these thought experiments. This might be indicative that a theory of (theoretical) wisdom should involve virtue-theoretic considerations. For discussion of intellectual character virtue-theoretic epistemology and its place in the field, see Baehr (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The agent could fail the desideratum of evidential understanding for theoretical minimal wisdom in various ways. She might fail to base her beliefs on relevant evidence, or fail to probabilistically inter-connect the various sets of her beliefs, or fail to reflect on life-changing questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. I refrain from the term happy because common usage, unfortunately, bears utilitarian\hedonistic connotations. These connotations are of course philosophically dubious because some happiness\well-being theorists could question if happiness need involve pleasure and avoidance of pain. Stoics would be a historical example of such a position, I think. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Plato’s *Apology* (38a) for the famous retort of the Socratic character. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Some may have skeptical worries about whether being epistemically virtuous (or ‘in the right’) really promotes eudaimonia. They may even cite empirical work supporting the idea. For example, some may question whether epistemic virtue, like moral virtue, does promote eudaimonia. They may suggest that virtue, be it moral or epistemic, only incurs suffering and misery because it is better to do and believe what promotes your self-interest and not what is virtuous. They may also continue to press the skeptical question of why be moral, epistemically in the right, or plain virtuous, anyway. These are legitimate hard questions that exercise philosophers since Plato’s *Republic* but unfortunately I cannot pursue them here. Suffice it to say that, like Plato, I find reasonable the idea that virtue is at least necessary for eudaimonia and that we ought to be virtuous, be it morally or epistemically. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Ryan (2013) for some discussion of a related point. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Compare Quine (1992:101-2): ‘Limited to our terms and devices, we grasp the world variously. I think of the disparate ways of getting at the diameter of an impenetrable sphere: we may pinion the sphere in calipers or we may girdle it with a tape measure and divide by pi, but there is no getting inside…[W]hat the empirical under-determination of global science shows is that there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world.’ Of course, for Quine (1992:95-102) not all conceptions are equally good\useful for our purposes. Pragmatic criteria like prediction, simplicity, economy, consilience etc. help us opt for the best conception of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)