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Epistemic Value and the Primacy of What We Care About

Linda Zagzebski

Abstract: In this paper I argue that to understand the ethics of belief we need to put it in a context of what we care about. Epistemic values always arise from something we care about and they arise only from something we care about. It is caring that gives rise to the demand to be epistemically conscientious. The reason morality puts epistemic demands on us is that we care about morality. But there may be a (small) class of beliefs which it is not wrong to hold unconscientiously. I also argue that epistemic values enjoy a privileged place in the panorama of what we care about because they are entailed by anything we care about. That means that when there is a conflict between caring about knowledge or true belief and caring about something else, that conflict cannot be resolved simply by following the one we care about the most because caring about knowledge in any domain is entailed by caring about that domain. Finally, I argue that whereas caring demands different degrees of conscientiousness in different contexts, contextualism about knowledge is less plausible.

1. Epistemic demands and the logic of caring

Let me begin with what we care about. By that I mean what is important to us to some degree. I am not assuming that we all care about the same things, but I will argue that if we care about anything, we must care about epistemic goods, and thus there are epistemic demands we cannot escape. I will also argue that epistemic value is always derivative from what we care about, and one of the most important things we care about is morality. There is no independent domain of epistemic value. Moral norms and epistemic norms apply to beliefs for the same reason: they are the demands of what we care about.

It follows from the logic of caring that if we care about anything, we must care about truth— true beliefs about that which we care about. If I care about my children's lives and I am minimally rational, I must care about having true beliefs about my children's lives.¹ If I care about the

history of medieval science, I must care about having true beliefs about medieval science. It is misleading to stop there, however, because an important reason we care about truth is that it is an aspect of something else that we care about even more than truth, namely, knowledge. I do not deny that it is possible to care about truth for its own sake, but it distorts our psychology to ignore the connection between true belief and knowledge. Compare the psychology of caring about one's plants. Because I care about my plants, I care that they have unblemished leaves of the right color for the species, but I care about that because what I really care about is healthy, thriving plants, and having bright, unblemished leaves is an aspect of good health in plants. I may also value bright, unblemished leaves for their own sake, but it would be misleading in any discussion of caring about the color of leaves to ignore the connection between unblemished leaves and healthy plants. Similarly, even though it is possible to value truth for its own sake, it is misleading in any discussion of caring about truth to ignore the connection between truth and knowledge. True belief may be just as useful as knowledge on some occasions (e.g., believing there is danger nearby), and having plants with bright, unblemished leaves may be just as useful as healthy plants on some occasion (e.g., I am having a party and want the garden to look nice temporarily), but true belief would not get so much attention were it not for the fact that it is an aspect of knowledge, a greater good than truth.

The logic of caring requires something stronger than true belief for a variety of reasons. For one thing, we are often agents in the domain of what we care about. We want beliefs that can serve as the ground of action, and that requires not only true beliefs, but confidence that the particular beliefs we are acting upon are true. The degree of confidence needed varies with the context. Acting involves time, usually effort, and sometimes risk or sacrifice, and it is not rational to engage in action

1 For a similar point see Hilary Kornblith, 'Epistemic Normativity,' *Synthese* 94 (1993), 357-376.

without a degree of confidence in the truth of the beliefs upon which we act that is high enough to make the time, effort, and risk involved in acting worthwhile. We also know that we have false beliefs, if for no other reason than that we sometimes have beliefs that conflict, and since we do not want false beliefs in the domains of what we care about, we want mechanisms to sort out the false beliefs from the true ones. In addition, we know much of what we know in the domains of what we care about from other people, and we want to be in a position to tell who is a trustworthy informant and which of two different informants in our community has the truth when they disagree. In addition, we often care that others care about what we care about, which means that we care about their having true beliefs about what we care about, and we also care, at least to some extent, about what they care about. So we care about being good informants to others, which requires that we have the qualities that make us trustworthy and credible. All of these epistemic goods are things we care about in addition to true belief. Some of them may appear in an account of knowledge, but it is not necessary to give an account of knowledge to observe that whatever knowledge is, it is desirable in the domains of things we care about. Finally, we want understanding, arguably a state we care about even more than knowledge in the domains of what we care about. In short, every epistemic state that is thought desirable— true belief, ability to distinguish true from false belief, confidence in our beliefs, credibility, ability to identify the trustworthy, knowledge, understanding— is desirable within a domain of what we care about because we care about that domain.

Some epistemologists take the position that the primary and perhaps only epistemic value is the maximization of the balance of truth over falsehood in our beliefs.² I think this view is false, but this paper can be

² See William Alston, 'Concepts of Epistemic Justification,' in Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 83. See also Alvin Goldman, 'The Unity of Epistemic Virtues,' in *Virtue Epistemology*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, Oxford University Press, 2001.

suitably altered for those who think it is true. The range of the arguments that follow would need to be narrowed in fairly obvious ways, but the structure of the arguments does not depend upon my claim that if we care about anything, we must care about knowledge and other epistemic goods in addition to truth in the domains of what we care about. For simplicity I will focus on the relationship between caring about something and caring about knowledge in that domain, but what I will argue can be easily amended to the more modest claim that if we care about anything, we must care about true belief in the domain of what we care about. And it can be easily extended to the more ambitious claim that if we care about anything, we must care about understanding and a variety of other epistemic goods in the domain of what we care about.

Caring about knowledge in domain *D* puts a demand on me to behave in a way that a conscientious seeker of knowledge in domain *D* would behave. The overworked word 'justification' is sometimes used to refer to the property a belief has when it is the result of conscientious knowledge-seeking behavior. In my vocabulary, a justified belief is an epistemically permissible belief; it does not violate any epistemic obligations.³ So to say that we have an epistemic obligation to have a justified belief is to make the vacuous claim that we have an epistemic obligation to have a belief that violates no epistemic obligations. But it is not vacuous to say there is a non-epistemic obligation to be epistemically justified, and I will argue in this paper that we have such obligations. These are the obligations of what we care about. What we care about gives us obligations to be epistemically justified, that is, to engage in conscientious belief-forming behavior. I assume that conscientiousness is something that comes in degrees, but what I mean by being more or less conscientious is not limited to having more or less evidence. To be conscientious is to try to be intellectually virtuous-- careful, thorough, open-minded, fair-minded, and so on for the other intellectual virtues.

3 In this paper I use the terms 'obligation' and 'demand' interchangeably.

Some of the intellectual virtues do not aim at getting truth and avoiding falsehood, but aim instead at the other things we care about mentioned above— confidence in our beliefs, trustworthiness and the ability to identify the trustworthy, credibility, understanding, and so on. Again, the relevant virtues can be expanded or contracted for readers who have broader or narrow positions on the range of epistemic value.

Since my position is that virtue has a success component, trying is not sufficient for acting virtuously, although some virtues are mostly trying (e.g., epistemic carefulness). There is probably a sense of obligation in which we have an obligation to be successful, and we may even have an obligation to get knowledge, but that is not the sense I will use in this paper. I am interested in the sense of obligation we are able to act upon, and we cannot act upon the advice to be successful. What we *can* do is to try; we can be conscientious. To be conscientious in believing is to try to form beliefs in a virtuous manner. So caring about knowledge in domain *D* demands that I try to be virtuous in seeking and forming beliefs in domain *D*. Since caring about knowledge in domain *D* puts a demand on me to be epistemically conscientious in seeking and forming beliefs in domain *D*, it follows that if I care about anything at all, there is a demand on me to be epistemically conscientious in the beliefs I have in the domain of what I care about.

When I say there is a demand on me that arises from the logic of caring, I do not mean to imply that the demand is moral. Not all demands are moral demands; not all obligations are moral obligations. The demand to be conscientious in my beliefs in domain *D* is conditional upon my caring about domain *D*. But being epistemically conscientious in the domains of what we care about is not optional. It is a demand of our caring.

The demand to be epistemically conscientious in my beliefs in the domain of what I care about is not only a demand to be conscientious in whatever beliefs I have; it is also a demand *to have* beliefs acquired in an epistemically conscientious manner. There is a demand to seek out such beliefs and to maintain them. One reason this is demanded is that my

awareness of the limits of a domain I care about are not set in advance of knowledge about the domain. Once I care about something, one of the most important things demanded of me by that caring is to find out the scope of the domain. If I care about my children's lives, I must conscientiously seek information that tells me what is relevant to my children's lives; that is, what is in the domain and what is not. No doubt there are degrees to which beliefs are relevant to something I care about, but even knowing *that* is something my caring demands that I care about. As I acquire an idea of the scope of the domain of what I care about, there is then a conditional demand on me to seek out more conscientiously acquired beliefs in that domain. But this demand must be qualified in various ways. For example, I might care about life on other planets, but given the difficulty in obtaining evidence or acquiring beliefs based on trustworthy authority in that domain, there probably is not a very strong demand on me to conscientiously seek beliefs about life on other planets, even if I care about it very much. There are also domains I care about, but I do not care about having beliefs in those domains since having such beliefs conflicts with something else I care about. For example, I may care deeply about the happiness and fulfillment of my friend's personal life, but since I also care about her privacy, I do not care about having beliefs— at least not many detailed beliefs, about her personal life. Even if I accidentally acquire such beliefs as the result of overhearing gossip, there is no demand on me to hold them conscientiously. On the contrary, there may be a demand on me to shed the beliefs, if possible. So even though I maintain that the demand to be conscientious is usually not exhausted by merely being conscientious in whatever beliefs I have in that domain, I am not claiming that caring about some domain always puts a demand on me to seek out conscientiously acquired beliefs in that domain nor is there always a demand on me to be conscientious in whatever beliefs I happen to have in that domain. But even the exceptions arise from something I care about, such as the privacy of my friends.

The more I care about something, the greater the demand that I be

epistemically conscientious in my beliefs in that domain, and the greater the demand to get and to maintain conscientiously acquired beliefs in that domain. The demand that I be conscientious in my beliefs about my children's lives is greater than the demand that I be conscientious in my beliefs about my plants. It also follows from the logic of caring that if I do not care about a domain at all, I should not seek beliefs in that domain. I do not think there is a common word to designate the opposite of caring, but whatever that attitude is—dis-caring or dis-valuing, I can have that attitude about some domains, and that puts a demand on me to not seek out beliefs in that domain. Granted, it is tempting to think that the demand to be conscientious in whatever beliefs we do have is independent of whether we care about the domain of the belief. But I will argue in section 3 that it is permissible to have unconscientious beliefs in certain domains.

In addition to variability in the degree of the demand that varies with the degree to which I care about a domain, there is variability in the degree of conscientiousness demanded of me that varies with the context. If the difference is unclear, we can think of the degree of the demand as the degree of the importance of doing what the demand requires-- the degree to which violating the demand reflects negatively on me. The degree of conscientiousness demanded is another matter. There can be a weak demand to be very conscientious and there can be a strong demand to be weakly conscientious. The degree of conscientiousness demanded of a particular belief varies with the circumstances. In one form of contextualism, the standards for knowledge change with what is important to either the subject or the attributor. For example, Keith DeRose maintains that whether we are willing to say that someone knows the bank will open on Saturday depends upon how important it is to him or to us that the bank is open. If the agent only needs \$10 and can obtain it elsewhere, it takes much less to know the bank is open on Saturday than if he will be shot by the

Mafia unless he can get money from the bank that day.⁴ In another contextualist example, I know that my children are playing in the backyard in ordinary circumstances if I saw them in the backyard five minutes ago playing a game that could be expected to last some time, but I do not know they are in the backyard once I find out that there is an escaped convict who has been taking hostages somewhere in the neighborhood.⁵ In the second case new information makes it more important that I am right that they are in the backyard (and can take away my previous knowledge that they are), whereas in the first case the context that makes it important that the bank is open on Saturday is set in advance. But in both cases the contextualist claims that there are more stringent requirements for knowledge when my life is at stake or my children's lives are at stake than in more ordinary circumstances.

I have not yet said anything about requirements for knowledge, but it is surely the case that the degree of conscientiousness required of me in forming my beliefs when I am at risk of being shot by the Mafia or my children are at risk of being taken hostage is much greater than in ordinary situations. An ordinary degree of conscientiousness is sufficient to ground action or omission in the usual, less threatening circumstances, but is insufficient when something I care about very much is at stake. The degree to which I care about my life and my children's lives may be the same in both contexts, but the degree to which my caring makes it important that a particular belief is true varies with the context.

The situation is no different if what I care about is idiosyncratic. Perhaps I am wild about my peonies and I believe they are doing just

4 Keith DeRose, 'Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, 913-929.

5 Bruce Brower, 'Epistemic Contextualism,' entry in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The fact that there is a hostage-taker somewhere in the neighborhood does slightly reduce the probability that my belief that the children are in the backyard is true, but the contextualist maintains that the degree to which I must be conscientious in my belief that they are in the backyard greatly exceeds the degree to which the probability that my belief is true has been reduced.

fine in the backyard since I watered them five minutes ago, but then I hear that a lunatic peony-hater has been in the neighborhood destroying peonies. Once I hear that, I have the same reason to be more conscientious in believing my peonies are fine as I did when it was my children's lives that were at stake. If my neighbor and I both looked at our peonies five minutes ago, discussing the fine points of peony culture, it would be odd to say she knows hers are fine and I do not know mine are fine just because I love my peonies more than she loves hers. But it is not strange to say that if it is important to me that my peonies are okay, it is required of me that I am conscientious in believing they are okay, and the degree of the demand to be conscientious depends upon the level of importance the safety of my peonies have to me. Furthermore, the degree of conscientiousness demanded depends upon the context. In contexts in which much is at risk if my belief p is false, given the degree to which I care about something, a high degree of conscientiousness in believing p is demanded of me, the degree of which can easily be greater than that demanded of my neighbor. That follows from the logic of caring about something. I may even care excessively about all sorts of things. It may be irrational, even immoral, to care about some of these things, but it is demanded by the logic of caring that I be conscientious in my beliefs, given that I care. The demand after all is conditional. Caring raises the bar of conscientiousness for me. Whether it also raises the bar of knowledge will be addressed in section 4.

The logic of caring can also explain why many philosophers are deeply concerned about the skeptical hypotheses. Given that it is very important to us that the world is more or less the way we think it is, it is very important to us that we are not brains in vats, and that puts a high demand on us to be very conscientious in our belief that we are not brains in vats. The degree of the demand to be conscientious depends upon the level at which we care. Again, this follows from the logic of caring, whether or not it has anything to do with knowledge. Philosophers no doubt care more than the average, and that is one of

the reasons skepticism is so threatening to philosophers and much less so to other people. It is not the awareness of the possibility of the skeptical scenario itself that is the problem, but caring about the way the world would be if the possibility obtained.

The logic of caring also has some interesting implications for religious epistemology. It follows from what I have said that the more important religion is to a person, the stronger the demand to have conscientiously acquired religious beliefs. This position differs from that of most religious epistemologists, including Alvin Plantinga, for whom doing one's epistemic duty with respect to some belief p and being rational (internally or externally) with respect to p has nothing to do with the importance of the content of the belief p .⁶ I am suggesting, in contrast, that the degree of conscientiousness demanded varies with the importance of the belief to the person who holds the belief. The more important the domain, the greater the demand that a belief in that domain be conscientious, and the degree of conscientiousness demanded of a particular belief depends upon how important it is to me in that context that the belief is true. But I have also argued that there is a demand to conscientiously acquire beliefs in the domains of what we care about, and this makes agnosticism problematic for those who care about the domain of religion. It would be interesting to investigate further the ways in which the logic of caring applies to religious belief, but I will not do that here.

6 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2000. I have argued elsewhere that Plantinga's conditions for being justified and internally rational are too easy to satisfy; e.g., he argues that voodoo beliefs can easily satisfy them. On the other hand, satisfaction of his conditions for external rationality and warrant are mostly a matter of luck. In the domain of Christian belief there is no connection at all between believing conscientiously and being warranted in a belief. Conscientiousness does practically no work in getting the agent to reach the truth. Almost all the work is done from the outside—the work of the Holy Spirit. See 'Philosophy of Religion: The Need for Engagement,' in *Knowledge and Belief. Proceedings of the 26th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, edited by W. Löffler and P. Weingartner, Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag/Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 2004, 386-398.

2. Morality and epistemic demands

Morality is something most of us care about a lot, and although it may be possible for a given individual not to care about morality, it is something we care about in the collective sense of 'we'. In fact, what distinguishes morality from other things we care about is that its application to a given individual does not depend upon the fact that that individual cares about morality. The fact that we care about morality collectively puts demands on each one of us. If morality's importance to us is unconditional, it follows that knowledge in the domain of morality is unconditionally important also. The importance of knowledge about moral matters puts a demand on each of us to be epistemically justified in those beliefs. There is a moral demand not to violate any epistemic demands. Given that there is an epistemic demand to be epistemically conscientious, there is a moral demand to be epistemically conscientious in my beliefs in the domain of morality. It is morally wrong to be epistemically unconscientious in any of these beliefs. Since these demands follow from the unconditional importance of morality, the demand to be epistemically conscientious in these beliefs and to conscientiously acquire beliefs in this domain is unconditional.

It does not follow from the fact that the demand to be epistemically conscientious in domain *M* is unconditional that the demand is great. Morality is highly important in general, but it is doubtful that every aspect of morality is highly important, and there are no doubt many contexts in which the demand that a particular belief relevant to morality is conscientious is not very great, even though the demand to be conscientious is not conditional upon caring about morality. It also seems to me that morality does not have well demarcated boundaries. For example, one of the things we care about is what others care about, but caring about what others care about is often understood to be a moral virtue. It certainly is a moral virtue in some contexts, whereas in others it is probably a virtue but not a moral virtue, and in still other contexts it is not a virtue at all. It is very doubtful that we can isolate the moral contexts of caring about what others care about. Truthfulness is

another quality that is generally understood to be a moral virtue. If that is correct, morality applies directly to the achievement or the effort to achieve the telling of the truth. But we have already seen that the demand to attempt to be truthful arises from other things we care about besides morality, so we know that it is not *only* a moral demand. But in addition, there are contexts in which truthfulness is not a moral demand, although it may be a demand of something else, for example, friendship. We have no moral obligation to reveal personal information to nosy inquirers, but we no doubt feel that the demands of personal intimacy require more extensive and detailed revelations of truths about ourselves. There are many other ways in which there is no clear distinction between the demands of morality and the demands of other things we care about. If the demands of morality are unconditional, whereas other things we care about make only conditional demands upon us, there is no clear line between what is unconditionally demanded and what is only conditionally demanded. This is not a problem I find very worrisome, so I will not say more about it.

Given that some things are morally more important than others, the degree of the demand to be conscientiousness demanded of me by morality varies, as it does in other cases of what I care about. My children's lives are more important morally than the safety of my peonies, and the moral demand to be epistemically conscientious in the belief that they are safe is greater. The degree to which I should be conscientious differs with the context since I need to be more conscientious in the hostage situation than in more ordinary situations. Even though the moral importance of my children's lives is the same in the hostage case and the ordinary case, the degree of conscientiousness morally required of me in the hostage case is greater.

As with other domains of what I care about, the logic of the importance of morality requires that I care about identifying the beliefs relevant to the domain. Suppose that I do not care much about global warming, but I do care about morality, and even if I do not care about morality, since morality is important *to us*, the demands of caring about

morality apply to me whether or not I care. One of the things demanded of me by morality is caring about what is a moral matter and what is not. So morality demands that I be epistemically conscientious in seeking beliefs that pertain to morality. If an epistemically conscientious search for such beliefs would lead me to acquire beliefs about global warming, then there is a moral demand on me to acquire epistemically conscientious beliefs about global warming.⁷

I think, however, that there is room for individual variability in the strength of the moral demand to be epistemically conscientious about beliefs whose moral importance is collective. Global warming may be a moral issue and an important one, but it does not follow that its level of moral importance to typical individuals is very great. It may not even be very important that a particular person's belief in a certain context is true. So the degree of conscientiousness morality requires of me in having a particular belief about global warming may not be very great. Unlike the case of my children playing in the backyard, global warming is an issue in which everyone has a shared interest. It seems to me that my beliefs about this issue may be conscientious enough to satisfy the demands of morality if I accept what I read or hear from those I trust, whereas the same level of conscientiousness would be insufficient in the hostage case.

Our considerations about the demands of what we care about can explain what is right about W.K. Clifford's famous example of the shipowner who sends his ship full of immigrants to sea, believing without evidence that his ship is seaworthy.⁸ Clifford is surely right that the shipowner is morally wrong in being epistemically unjustified in this case, but the example is insufficient to support his famous thesis that it is morally wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. Suppose that the shipowner has no intentions of sending the ship to sea, but if he can attest that the ship is seaworthy, he will get a tax deduction. He

7 I thank Ray Elugardo for the example of global warming.

8 W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, edited by Timothy J. Madigan, Prometheus Books, 1999.

believes the ship is seaworthy and declares that it is in order to get the deduction, but does not bother to do a careful and expensive inspection of the ship. Or maybe he simply announces to a friend that his ship is seaworthy while the two of them are in a bar, bragging to each other about their respective ships. At worst he has violated a weak moral requirement.

In Ian McEwan's novel, *Atonement* (N.Y.: Random House [Anchor Books], 2003), a bright and imaginative thirteen-year-old girl, Briony Tallis, witnesses a flirtatious incident between her older sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, the talented son of a servant, who has been awarded a scholarship to Cambridge. When Briony later finds them in an embrace, her sexual innocence combined with her attraction to the melodramatic leads her to interpret the event as an act of aggression against her sister. When a guest is raped later that night in the dark wood near the house, Briony, who had a fleeting glimpse of the assailant, swears that it was Robbie. The innocent Robbie is convicted and sent to prison upon Briony's evidence, breaking the family apart and ruining the lives of Robbie and Cecilia. In this story, Briony sincerely believes her testimony, but her belief is acquired unconsciously and is a moral wrong to Robbie and probably to others as well. The adults in the story also form beliefs and act upon the beliefs unconsciously, and we probably blame them more than Briony herself since the demands of conscientiousness in adults no doubt exceed the demands on children. This story illustrates the moral obligation to care about true belief, but in addition, it shows the moral demand to care about the other epistemic goods mentioned at the beginning of this paper— trustworthiness, credibility, knowledge, and understanding, and it shows the moral importance of such intellectual virtues as carefulness, open-mindedness, intellectual fairness, and intellectual humility, which go well beyond Clifford's demand to have sufficient evidence. But it also supports Clifford's point that the great wrong of believing unconsciously (or upon insufficient evidence, in Clifford's view) is that it makes a person credulous. Briony's personality and the isolated circumstances of her life

make her a credulous person. In this case the results are tragic, but Clifford is right that intellectual credulity is a moral failing whether or not it has tragic results.

The way in which morality dictates and constrains the demand to be epistemically conscientious explains why we think, in general, that moral virtue puts a higher demand on us to be conscientious in any negative belief we have about others than on the corresponding positive beliefs, and again, the degree of conscientiousness required varies with the context. There is no doubt also a moral demand not to seek beliefs in certain areas, such as other people's personal lives, and it explains why curiosity can be a vice.⁹

We are morally required to be epistemically conscientious in a very broad range of beliefs because of the social dimension of belief-formation. It is not at all obvious whether some belief will be relevant to moral judgment or action by myself or someone else who relies on my testimony, so that gives us a *prima facie* duty to be conscientious in a vast number of our beliefs. When we add to that the range of things we care about outside of morality, including caring about what others care about, that broadens even further the range of beliefs that we are required to be epistemically justified in holding. Finally, there are epistemic demands of the social roles we perform. A jurist in a litigation case has an obligation to reach a decision conscientiously whether or not she cares about the case and whether or not the case involves something within the domain of morality. (It can easily happen that whether the litigant *morally* deserves a particular monetary settlement is not at issue). Here the epistemic demand arises not from what she cares about personally, but from the importance of the role itself. So in addition to morality, there may be other things whose importance to us collectively makes epistemic demands on us whether or not we care about them ourselves.

These considerations extend the range of beliefs that must be epistemically justified as a demand of something outside of epistemic

9 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 167, for a discussion of the vice of curiosity.

value itself— what we care about individually or collectively— to cover a very wide range of our beliefs. I conclude that the question, ‘Is there a demand to be seek epistemically conscientious beliefs in this domain and how great a demand is it?’, cannot be answered without a background theory of what we care about. The degree of the demand and the degree of the conscientiousness demanded must be placed in a context of what we care about as well as the situational context of the formation of particular beliefs.

3. Conflicts among the things we care about

Caring about knowledge is entailed by the logic of caring about anything, and one of the things some people care about is knowledge for its own sake. It is highly unlikely that anybody cares about every possible item of knowledge for its own sake, but if someone does, there is a conditional demand on her to be conscientious in all of her beliefs and to conscientiously acquire as many beliefs as possible. Alternatively, some of us care about knowledge because we believe that a life of flourishing is a life that includes knowledge, even knowledge about some matters that we do not otherwise care about. It might be a fact about a flourishing life that such a life has much knowledge, and if aiming at a flourishing life is not conditional upon a choice, but is something we aim at by nature, then it is a demand of nature that we care about knowledge. But it is doubtful that every item of knowledge contributes to a flourishing life, so even if there is a demand of nature that we have conscientiously formed beliefs, the demand probably does not extend to every possible belief.¹⁰ But even if it does, it is caring that requires the agent to form beliefs in a conscientious manner. The extent of the demand to be conscientious is the extent of what is demanded by what the agent cares about and what we care about collectively-- morality and social roles. There is no epistemic value that is unhinged from what we care about.

¹⁰ I have explored the connection between the good of knowledge and human flourishing in ‘The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good,’ *Metaphilosophy* 34:1/2 (Jan. 2003), 12-28.

It is common for epistemologists to discuss epistemic value without reference to what we care about, but it is hard to see what grounds the values they have in mind. Perhaps this is just an example of the reticence of epistemologists to discuss value theory, but we do need some explanation of what makes epistemic value a value. William Alston defines epistemic value as value 'from the epistemic point of view'.¹¹ I find this a misleading way to explain our caring about truth, knowledge, understanding, and the other epistemic values mentioned in this paper since it encourages the mistake of thinking that epistemic value is a special category of value in competition with, and perhaps incommensurable with, moral and pragmatic value. Suppose I care about my flowers. It would be odd to express that by saying that flowers are valuable from the floral point of view or that I am required to do S from the floral viewpoint. The fact that what I care about is a certain sort of thing x does not make x important from the x viewpoint, nor does it make me required to behave in a certain way from the x viewpoint. So if I care about knowledge, it would be odd to say that that makes knowledge valuable from the epistemic viewpoint and what I am thus demanded to do the thing to do from the epistemic viewpoint. There can be conflicts between the things I care about, but the conflict does not arise from different points of view. False beliefs or unconscientiously acquired beliefs can be beneficial to the agent or conducive to morality, and true beliefs or conscientiously acquired beliefs can be harmful to the agent or detrimental to morality. This is not a conflict between points of view if, as I have argued, epistemic values arise from any point of view-- or rather, since I am skeptical of the 'point of view' terminology, they arise from anything I care about.

If we say that epistemic value is value from an epistemic point of view, moral value is value from a moral point of view, and so on, that tends to stymie discussion because it appears that we have to deal with conflicting

11 William Alston, 'Concepts of Epistemic Justification,' in Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 83.

points of view in order to resolve the conflict. My position is that if we understand epistemic value as always entailed by something we care about, the conflict arises between the different things we care about. I am not suggesting that the conflict is always easy to resolve, only that it is an instance of the common and quite non-mysterious phenomenon of caring about things that conflict in particular contingent circumstances.

Suppose that an unconsciously formed belief B in domain X (my health, my appearance) would alleviate distress and give me comfort. If I care about domain X, then with the qualifications noted earlier, I am required to form conscientious beliefs in domain X, which requires me not to believe B. But I also care about comfort and avoiding distress, and belief B would give me comfort. So believing B is required by one of the domains I care about, but is forbidden by another. The easiest answer to this dilemma is that I follow the requirement that arises from what I care about the most, but there is a problem if I violate the requirement to believe conscientiously: I am forced to engage in self-deception. Clearly, no matter which way I go, I am forced to act against something that I care about. The self-deception arises in forgetting that. If I do not believe B, I will not forget it. On the contrary, I will be continually reminded of it since I will feel discomfort. But if I do believe B, believing B will only work to comfort me if I deceive myself about the epistemic requirements of caring about my comfort. Caring about my comfort entails that I care about having true beliefs about my comfort, so I am required to believe that believing B gives me comfort, something that is not likely to give me comfort. Only by engaging in self-deception can I get comfort by believing G. I am not concluding that we should never do that since I would not say that self-deception is always a bad thing. I am merely pointing out the problem. And the problem is exacerbated if I care about not being self-deceived.

An interesting conflict within the things we care about arises with the possession of opinions. I find the ethics of opinion an important but neglected topic in epistemology. 'Opinion' probably applies to a number of different cognitive states, some of which are weaker than beliefs. But

many of them, presumably, *are* beliefs, and a significant number of those have a property that is problematic: They are unjustified. Furthermore, they are known to be unjustified by the agent who has them. That is why they are called opinions.

The fact that we often append the expression of an opinion with the disclaimer, 'That's just my opinion,' suggests that we are alerting others that we do not want to be socially committed to the truth of the belief expressed. Other people ought not to take what we say as information. That gets us off the hook in one sense: We cannot be held responsible for harming others if they believe what we say. But opinions are typically in a domain of something we care about, so it is far from clear that we have acted conscientiously in having the opinion at all. It is common to say that people have a right to their opinions, but that might mean only that they have a political right, a right to non-interference. It does not follow from that that we are doing no wrong in having opinions. The impermissibility of unjustified opinions cannot be established so easily, however. Having opinions can arise from something we care about. When I have asked friends what they think about the problem I am addressing here, sometimes they say that it is fun to have opinions, or that one of the things we care about is having beliefs about certain topics and we care about what others believe apart from the truth of what they believe. It surely must be the case that many people think this way. Why else would the media focus more attention on the fact that people have certain opinions than on assessing the content of the opinions?

One indication that we do not usually think of opinions as always wrong is that we say that an opinionated person is one who has too many opinions, implying that there is something like the right number of opinions. We might also think that there is a vice opposed to being opinionated. Consider how we react when we ask students their opinion on a philosophical issue discussed in class. If they have no opinion, we tend to think that that indicates they are not thinking.¹² If so, we must

¹² I thank Ray Elugardo for this observation.

think that an active inquirer starts to form opinions early on. Perhaps having an opinion aids rather than inhibits further inquiry. It is doubtful that this is true in all areas of discourse, but it might be true in philosophy and in other domains in which it is extremely difficult to get justified beliefs.

In those cases in which having an opinion is a demand of something we care about but the opinion is not conscientiously formed, we have the same problem of conflict between things we care about that arises when an unjustified belief is demanded by caring about my psychological well-being: I must indulge in self-deception. If I am right that caring about knowledge in the domain of what we care about is always demanded by caring about that domain, then if one thing I care about demands that I have the opinion and another thing I care about demands that I do not, the only way I can have the opinion is to forget that I care about knowledge and other epistemic goods in that domain. I am inclined to think then, that it is highly problematic to have any unconscientiously formed belief in a domain of what I care about. That makes a very large proportion of our opinions problematic. As I have said, sometimes caring about knowledge and caring about not being self-deceived can be over-ridden by other things we care about, but my conjecture is that that does not happen very often among self-reflective persons.

I have argued that there is no demand to be epistemically conscientious or to get knowledge that is not based on something we care about. If there is such a demand, the argument for it needs to be given. It follows from my position that if a belief does not concern any domain I care about, nor is related to morality or to any role I am performing that is something we care about collectively, then I am violating no obligation if the belief is unjustified, that is, is not formed conscientiously. The range of beliefs that are permissibly unjustified is no doubt very small, but the existence of such beliefs has not been ruled out. For example, suppose I believe that my great-great-grandmother was born on a Wednesday, and my reason for thinking so is weak. This might be an example of a belief that has nothing to do with morality or

anything I care about or anything that is important for one of my social roles. The imaginative reader will no doubt think of some story in which this belief would be related either to morality or to something I care about, but it does seem possible that no such story is true, and that this is a belief that is outside the range of what I care about or anybody I care about cares about, and which furthermore is outside of anything related to morality or to performing my social roles. It is also possible that having this belief will not make me credulous, the vice abhorred by Clifford. If so, I propose that I have done no wrong in any sense if I have the belief unconscientiously.

4. Knowledge and what we care about

Elsewhere I have defined knowledge as an act of intellectual virtue, by which I mean an act of getting to the truth because of one's virtuous motives and behavior.¹³ A variant would be getting to the truth because of one's conscientious motives and behavior. I have argued in this paper that given what we care about, some contexts demand more conscientiousness than others. Does it follow that knowledge requires more conscientiousness in some contexts than in others? Possibly, but I doubt it. It depends upon how we understand the because-of relation in particular cases. Since I have not given an analysis of that relation and do not know of one that is plausible, there may be room for context variance in my account of knowledge, but much more would need to be done to reveal that variance.

Generally contextualists rely on intuitions about examples, so let us return to the cases of the hostage-taker and the peony-destroyer. If I believe my children are in the backyard based on seeing them there five minutes ago, then in ordinary circumstances, if the belief is true, we do not hesitate to say that I know my children are in the backyard.

¹³ In *Virtues of the Mind* I define knowledge as true belief arising from acts of intellectual virtue. In 'The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good' (ibid), I argue that knowledge is not the result of an act, but is an act, so part of the original definition is redundant. In both definitions having a virtue is not necessary for performing an act of virtue.

Similarly, if I saw my peonies thriving five minutes ago, my belief that they are still fine constitutes knowledge in ordinary circumstances if true. However, given that my children's safety is very important to me, if I find out there is a lunatic hostage-taker in the neighborhood, it is more important than usual that my belief that they are in the backyard is true, and the degree of conscientiousness demanded of me in believing they are in the backyard goes up. I am not conscientious enough if I believe my children are okay based on the fact that I saw them five minutes ago. Similarly, if I love my peonies a lot, then if I find out there is a peony-destroyer in the neighborhood, I am not conscientious enough in believing my peonies are thriving if the belief is based on the fact that I saw them thriving five minutes ago. But this leads to the question, 'Conscientious enough for what? For knowledge?' Knowledge is not the only thing we need to be conscientious *for*.

In subject-based contextualism the question of whether some subject has knowledge depends upon the subject's context. In attributor-based contextualism the attribution of knowledge to a subject depends upon the attributor's context. It seems to me that whether the agent gets to the truth because of her conscientious behavior cannot depend upon how much she cares that her belief is true. The causal relation (or 'because' relation) between trying and success is not dependent upon what the agent cares about. Admittedly, the lack of clarity about what it *does* depend upon leaves my observation here at little more than an intuition, but I imagine that it is a common one.

Furthermore, if knowledge did depend upon what the agent cares about, that would have some implausible consequences. It would mean that my neighbor knows her peonies are okay and I do not when we are equally conscientious in our beliefs that our respective peonies are fine and the only difference between us is that I care more about my peonies than she does hers. It would also mean that if someone cares excessively about all sorts of things, that fact is sufficient to take away much of her knowledge about those things, whereas someone else who has the opposite vice and cares very little about anything thereby has more

knowledge than the rest of us. So subject-based contextualism of the kind discussed here is implausible and is not countenanced by the definition of knowledge I endorse.

Attributor based contextualism is implausible for the same reason if there is no restriction on who the attributor is. The fact that the attributor's degree of caring can be idiosyncratic does not affect the issue of whether the agent's getting the truth is due to her conscientious believing. But suppose the attributor is not idiosyncratic, but is an ideal observer? According to the Ideal Observer theory in meta-ethics, moral judgments are true just in case they would be affirmed by a being with ideal properties such as omniscience, impartiality, and sympathy with all the relevant agents. If an Ideal Observer theory of meta-ethics is plausible, I so no reason why it would not also be plausible as applied to non-moral evaluative judgments, including judgments of epistemic value. The idea would be that S knows p just in case an ideal observer of S would attribute knowledge of p to S. The ideal observer would not simply be a being who applies the criteria for knowledge specified by a given theory, but would have the properties of an ideal being-- perhaps an ideal human, including what such a person cares about. Debate about what the ideal observer cares about is a feature of the meta-ethical literature. I suspect that literature would be useful for the development of an Ideal Observer theory of knowledge, which would be an interesting variant of contextualism.

Definitions of knowledge similar to my own and which I have endorsed elsewhere have been given by John Greco, Wayne Riggs, and with slightly different wording by Ernest Sosa. Greco and Riggs define knowledge as true belief in which the agent gets credit for reaching the truth.¹⁴ Sosa proposes that knowledge is true belief in which reaching the

14 See Wayne Riggs, 'Reliability and the Value of Knowledge,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64:1 (January 2002), 79-96, and 'The Real Value of Knowing that P,' *Philosophical Studies* 107 (2002), 87-108; John Greco, 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief,' *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003.

truth is attributed to the agent as her or her own doing.¹⁵ The idea here is that when the agent knows, she deserves credit, or in Sosa's account, she deserves to be attributed with the achievement of truth. But that leaves undetermined whether getting credit or being attributed with achieving truth is a state that is bestowed on the agent or whether it is independent of an imaginary attributor. Who or what determines whether the agent deserves credit for getting the truth? What the imaginary attributor cares about might affect the attribution of credit, so there is room for attributor-based contextualism in these accounts, and Greco (*ibid*) endorses a form of contextualism.

If the standards for knowledge depend upon what the agent or attributor cares about, that has the ironic consequence that the more the agent or attributor cares, the more conscientious the agent is required to be, and the less likely it is that she will know. If knowledge is credit for true belief the result is paradoxical, for it means that the more I or my attributor cares, the less likely it is that I will be credited with successfully reaching truth. But the more conscientious I am in getting to the truth, the more credit I deserve. So caring and conscientiousness pull in opposite directions. The former makes it harder to deserve credit; the latter makes it easier. Caring makes it harder to get knowledge; conscientiousness *should* make it easier. Those who combine the view that knowledge is credit for true belief with contextualism need a way to avoid this paradox.

5. Conclusion

What unifies the various demands to be epistemically conscientious is what we care about. This explains why we think that persons with epistemically unjustified beliefs are irrational. They are irrational because they have beliefs that oppose demands of what *they* care about. I have argued that epistemic values always arise from something we care about, and I have argued that epistemic values arise only from

¹⁵Ernest Sosa, 'The Place of Truth in Epistemology,' in DePaul and Zagzebski (*ibid*).

something we care about. It is caring that gives rise to the demand to be epistemically conscientious. That means that there may be a (small) class of beliefs which it is not wrong to hold unconscientiously. I have also argued that epistemic values enjoy a privileged place in the panorama of what we care about because they are entailed by anything we care about. That means that when there is a conflict between caring about knowledge or true belief and caring about something else, that conflict cannot be resolved simply by following the one we care about the most because caring about knowledge in any domain is entailed by caring about that domain. The only way we can choose against epistemic value in some domain is by engaging in self-deception. Self-deception may not always be a bad thing, but it should be recognized for what it is. Finally, I have argued that whereas caring demands different degrees of conscientiousness in different contexts, contextualism about knowledge is less plausible, but a form of contextualism modeled on the Ideal Observer theory of meta-ethics has not been ruled out.¹⁶

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¹⁶ I thank Wayne Riggs, Steve Ellis, and Ward Jones for comments and discussions about this paper.