

Knowledge as Achievement – Greco’s Double Mistake

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Abstract

John Greco claims that knowledge is a kind of achievement. The value achievements have (as such) shows, according to Greco, why knowledge is better than mere true belief. I argue that, for a variety of reasons, it is not always good to know. Furthermore, it is wrong to think that achievements are always good – think of achieving what is bad. Greco is mistaken twice; this leaves the idea that knowledge is a kind of achievement intact.

1. Introduction

In virtue epistemology, the traditional concern about the nature of knowledge goes hand in hand with another concern, the quest to show why knowledge is a good thing. These concerns are obviously connected. The value of anything will depend on its nature: whether what you carry around in your pocket is valuable depends on what it is that you carry around in your pocket.

Contemporary virtue epistemology draws inspiration from parallels between the theoretical domain of belief and knowledge and the practical domain of intention and action. Successful action has become the model on which to understand success in our epistemic endeavours. John Greco makes this parallel central to his recent book *Achieving Knowledge*. ‘The central thesis of this book’, Greco says, ‘is that knowledge is a kind of success from ability’ (Greco 2010, 3). The lucky guess which happens to be true does not amount to knowledge. Although you succeed in what is, let us suppose, your aim, namely to get things right, that you get it right is not due to your cognitive abilities. The archer’s lucky shot, which hits the target because a sudden gust of wind diverts it from its given path, is, similarly, not a success due to ability. Successful actions count as achievements only if the agent’s success is due to the agent’s abilities. According to

Greco, the notion of knowledge captures our achievements within the theoretical domain. Thereby epistemic achievements participate in a general category we are familiar with from the practical domain. The notions of value and normativity as they apply to beliefs and knowledge are illuminated by their participation in the general category of achievements.

The idea that knowledge is a kind of achievement not only helps us with the nature question – Greco argues that it gives the right verdict on Gettier cases – it also issues a direct answer to the value question. I want my children to be happy but even more so do I value a state in which their happiness is to some extent due to my own contributions. I want my paper to be published but even more so do I value a state in which its publication is due (in the right way) to my own doing. In general, we value being active participants in the fortunes of our lives over being passive recipients of goods. If we achieve something through effort and due to our abilities we satisfy this need for active involvement. Greco expresses this idea as follows. ‘Knowledge is a kind of success from ability, and in general success from ability is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing, which is also intrinsically valuable. Moreover, both success from ability and human flourishing have ‘final’ value, or value as ends in themselves, independently of any instrumental value they might also have. Therefore, knowledge has value over and above the practical value of true belief’ (Greco 2010, 174f).

Let me separate the claims Greco is making. First, we encounter the idea that epistemological notions are instances or analogues of notions from the practical domain. This claim is what is distinctive of virtue epistemology. It is also central to Ernest Sosa’s view. Sosa understands knowledge as apt belief, i.e. as a belief the truth of which is due to an agent’s competence. Sosa’s AAA terminology renders knowledge an instance of a general kind, namely of performances which are accurate because adroit and, thus, apt. His favourite example of an apt performance is the archer’s shot. Shots that hit the target are accurate; those that manifest an agent’s skill are adroit; shots are apt and are, thus, good shots, if they are accurate because they are adroit. Similarly, an agent knows when the fact that his belief is true is due to an agent’s intellectual skill. Animal knowledge, which contrasts with reflective knowledge, is apt belief. The Gettier Problem is a test for this view. Greco’s second claim is that understanding knowledge as success from ability issues the right verdict in Gettier case. Virtue epistemology, according to Greco, solves the Gettier Problem. The third of Greco’s claim

is that it is a good thing to know. It is better to know something than to guess, even if guessing correctly. Finally, Greco's fourth claim is that the nature of knowledge explains its value. Achievements are good. Knowledge is an achievement. Thus, it is a good thing to know.

In this discussion I will start with Greco's third claim: it is better to know than to have a merely true belief. Contrary to Greco I will argue that it's good to know some things; other things, however, are better not known. And then there are things where it really does not matter whether we know them or not. Thus, I disagree with Greco about the target, i.e. to explain that knowledge is good or that it is better than mere true belief. He tried to explain the value of knowledge via the value of achievements. Achievements, I claim, are not always good either. Achieving the bad, for example, is not good. Greco, thus, makes a double mistake which seems to leave the idea that the nature of knowledge can be illuminated via the idea of achievements on the table, or so I will argue.

2. Greco's First Mistake

Greco's first mistake is to assume that the value of knowing is independent of what it is that is known. Contrary to Greco, I claim that sometimes it is good to know and sometimes it is not – it depends, amongst other things, on what it is that is known. Knowledge is important in the pursuit of important projects. However, not always is it good to know.

(A) You can know too much. You might become an obstacle or a danger to others if you know what they do not want you to know. Some knowledge, like knowing when and how you are going to die, would often interfere with and hinder a pursuit of a normal life's project, especially if you'd know that you are going to die prematurely. In such cases it doesn't matter much whether you know or truly believe. These are cases in which a lack of any epistemic attitude is advantageous. Similarly, even if true, it might be better not to know some bad things. It would be very bad to know that no one loves you, bad that none of your colleagues respects you. In such cases a belief that p (namely that the bad thing is not true) is better than its opposite as well as better than withholding, even if it would amount to having a false belief.

(B) Some things are simply not your business. For example, there are limits on what you are allowed to know about your neighbours. Keeping a diary about when they go to bed and when they get up does not serve any

legitimate epistemic interest. Legitimate curiosity is limited and nosiness is a vice.

(C) Think about the category of experiences described by knowing what it is like. Knowledge of what it is like to kill someone, knowledge of what it is like to have your fingernails pulled out – it has, for most of us, nothing to be said for it. I have a weird friend. When his cat died, he didn't bury it in the garden. He keeps it in his shed in a sealed transparent plastic bag. Do you want to know what a dead cat looks like after 2 weeks or after 2 months? He gave me some pictures. Would you like to see them? Free knowledge! No? I thought so.

(D) Think about all the matters others take interest in. My auntie is interested in what her neighbour reads and in where it was she has last seen her cousin. I understand her concern but I am myself not interested in any of these things. I might want to know when I last visited my dentist. But do you want to know? Should I tell you? It's no effort for me and if it does you some good – I can easily tell you. I need not bother? It would not do you any good? Alright then. I need to know my own date of birth and that of my children. No one needs to know everyone's date of birth. Dates of birth are important pieces of biographical information. Still you don't want to know. I don't know what happened to my old tennis shoes I threw away years ago and I don't know what Kevin Costner is doing at the moment. I DON'T CARE. Now think about all the things no one has ever taken any interest in. The history of a leaf on a tree provides a lifetime worth of study. It grows, it moves as the wind blows – first this way, then that way. A bee flies past at a certain distance. And even if nothing happens that'd be worth recording to, if truth in itself mattered. If God would whisper only the tiniest amount of all there is to know in our ears we would die of that roar. I conclude that we do not need to explain why knowledge is always good because, for most things, it is not good to know them.

What would it mean if we said that knowledge is good? Do we mean it's just plain and simply good or do we mean that it is good for the person who knows (and for others who might need the information he has)? The second option is less obscure and, for that reason, more plausible. Let's leave the matters devoid of any interest aside – these matters don't make it into Wikipedia – and concentrate on what is of interest to some people. Would you like to know everything that one can find in Wikipedia? What good would that do for you, the Wikipedia man? If you are around and someone wants to know the four districts of Tomsk and you say 'Kirovsky,

Leninsky, Oktyabrski, Sovetski', you are weird. 'Famous resident, the philosopher Gustav Shpet – translator of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, executed 16/11 1937.' One is not supposed to know these things (unless one is from Tomsk or related to Shpet). In which way would this be good for you? There is no good answer, I can think of.

In my paper 'Valuing Knowledge' (Piller 2009), I have tried to make fun of philosophers who assert that knowledge is always a good thing. They are the majority and they say outrageous things. In between we find philosophers who do not put their common sense on the hanger when they arrive at the office. Jane Heal (1987/88) who compares the project of matching every fact with its corresponding belief with the project of providing every garden with a suitable garden gnome – a useless and absurd project – is one of them.

If someone says something simply because it's funny, we understand what the person saw in saying it (even if, overall, it was wildly inappropriate). If, in contrast, someone says something simply because it is true (or because he knows it), we do not yet understand why he said it. Assert what you know would, if implemented, be a sufficient reason not to leave one's room anymore. What about believing? Is it not enough to believe something because it is true? Once you think it's true, you believe it already, so its being true won't explain (in this sense) why you believe it. How do we express a concern for truth then? We are careful in our enquiry; we choose methods which are likely to lead to the truth in respect to the issue which interests us. The care we take in such cases is, however, often explained by what explains our interest in truth. I need to be at the meeting in time. So I better double check its starting time. I need to know who did what in order to reward or punish those who deserve it. And so on. What about curiosity? Isn't it to be concerned about truth for truth's sake? Heal talks about a person who is writing the numbers of the cars parked on the street in his notebook. A police investigation? A traffic survey? Someone from the Office for Statistical Research? No. None of those. He is simply and plainly a truth-seeker!

We are happy to acknowledge that what we find fascinating (philosophy, let's say), others might just yawn at. They might subscribe to the *Heraldry Gazette* or study for the spelling championship. It's a wide church but there's a dogma: one must be capable of explaining why some subject matter is interesting – at least interesting to oneself, even if not to others. Sharing a human nature, we want to understand what gets you going and what

you are up to. The truth-seeker without anything further to say is not admitted. The Wikipedia man doesn't make sense to us; what is the project in which knowing everything could play a role? Even a much more limited project like following the being-a-partner-city relation from some given subset doesn't make any sense unless there is, for example, a competition in which such knowledge might win a prize. Any interest in this relation would have to be motivated by concerns we could understand, e.g. a limited project of this kind might serve some sociological interest. If you just want to know which city partners which other without such explanation, you don't make sense.

3. Greco's Second Mistake

I said that Greco makes a double mistake. His second mistake is to think that achievements are good. Despite Greco's claim to the contrary, I cannot believe that there is anyone who would really think that every success from ability has something good in it. Think of the achievement of what is distasteful, brutal or, in some other way, horrible. Greco's value claim is intended to contrast the lucky success with the success due to one's abilities. However, the fact that the terrible result is the result of competent agency does not diminish its negative value; to the contrary, the intended brutal assault is worse than the accident which, otherwise, has the same disastrous results.

Greco borrows the idea that knowledge is success from ability (or that knowledge is the manifestation of a competence) from Ernest Sosa. For Sosa knowledge is apt belief; apt belief is belief which is accurate because it is adroit. Though agreeing on the nature of knowledge, Sosa, like me, finds Greco's answer to the value question implausible. Let me make my own use of Sosa's archery example to illustrate this point. Think of an archer who practices his skills on the children's playground. Not that he himself is on the children's playground, no, the playground and its children are his target. He himself is 100 yards away. Despite this distance, his arrows, let us assume, nail five-year old Charlie to the climbing frame in exactly the way he intended. The detectives, who investigate this horrible act, will be able to reduce the list of suspects in virtue of the fact that hitting a child from such a distance, if intended, would be a good, actually a truly excellent shot: a good shot and a wicked and horrible act with nothing good in it.

Greco, however, seems unimpressed. He insists, ‘... knowledge is a kind of success from ability, and in general success from ability is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of human flourishing, which is also intrinsically valuable.’ (Greco 2010, 137) ‘I follow Aristotle’, he says ‘in holding that success from ability is constitutive of human flourishing, which has final value’ (Greco 2010, 180). Aristotle, however, was talking about the exercise of the virtues. Greco, surprisingly, seems to fail to realize that virtues are not the whole but only a subset of abilities. If one is able to use the faults and weaknesses of one’s children to deeply embarrass and humiliate them in front of their peers, such skill is, needless to say, not a virtue.

Greco does not engage with this point. Duncan Pritchard does. Considering the achievement of something pointless or wicked, Pritchard writes, ‘Are even achievements of this sort of final value? Note, however, that the value of achievement thesis, properly construed, is only that achievements have final value *qua* achievements’ (2010, 45). Achievements, according to Greco and Pritchard, always contribute something positive to overall states of affairs. It is compatible with this idea that these overall states of affairs containing achievement are overall bad. Furthermore, the laws of how values combine can throw up all sorts of things. Putting some perfectly nice bright red ketchup on the yellow dress will spoil it. Similarly, if I hit the target, which happens to be the child on the playground, then the overall value is lower if I hit it ‘virtuously’, i.e. because of my skill, than had I hit it accidentally. Pritchard says, ‘It is important to recognize that the value of achievement thesis when properly understood is entirely consistent with this possibility’ (*ibid*).

As long as we understand that achievements are only good *as* achievements, Pritchard suggests, we are free from trouble. The badness of horrible acts is compatible, he says, with the idea that achievements are good *qua* achievements. What does it mean to say of something that it is good as such and such?

(i) *The attributive use of ‘being good as such’*. Suppose I tell a student, ‘There’s good and bad news. As a philosophy essay your paper is rather poor. However, as something the reading of which is a complete waste of time it is, actually, very good.’ ‘X is good as such and such’ often means that X is a good such and such. ‘You might think of Idi Amin whatever you

want but as a poker player, he was very good.’ He was good as a poker player means he was a good poker player.

We have met this idea before. Shooting little Charlie required an excellent shot and was a horrible act with nothing good in it. Peter Geach has famously argued, ‘There is no such thing as being just good or bad, there is only being a good or bad so-and-so’ (Geach 1956, 34). In Geach’s preferred terms ‘good’ is a logically attributive adjective, whereas adjectives like ‘red’ are logically predicative. There are good dentists, good strawberries, good lawnmowers, but there is nothing – no property of goodness – in virtue of which they would all be good.

Attributive goodness is not the same as contributory goodness, which is what Greco was after. A good shot is good as a shot but might have nothing that speaks in its favour and everything against. Sosa’s views are best seen as taking epistemology to deal in its own notion of attributive goodness. A justified and, in this sense, good belief need not have anything good about it – the subject matter might lack any legitimate interest. ‘Silly beliefs about trivial matters can attain the very highest level of justification and knowledge even if these are not beliefs that one should be bothering with, not even if one’s concerns are purely epistemic’ (Sosa, 2007, 66.)

(ii) *The contrastive and, thus, predicative use of ‘being good as such’.* Achievements are good as achievements – does not, at first sight, say very much except that achievements are good. Compare ‘Friendship is good qua friendship’. This means, I guess, no more than that friendship is good. In both cases we use ‘good’ predicatively. Compare ‘Pleasure is good as pleasure’. As in the two previous cases, this says that pleasure is good. Why do we say these apparently trivial things? In identifying something as something we identify its evaluative dimension and we contrast this evaluative aspect with some of its other aspects. Being pleased, let us assume, is being in a certain physiological state. Under this assumption, the statement that being pleased is good *qua* being pleased tells us that being pleased rather than being in its corresponding physiological state is what is of evaluative importance. Let us apply this idea to achievements. Saying that achievements are good as achievements, is identifying the way in which they are good (predicatively). The contrast in this case is with what has been achieved. On this view, hitting the child skilfully has an aspect to it which is good. I find it hard to believe that anyone could, on reflection, really believe such a thing.

4. Conclusion and Looking Ahead

I conclude that Greco’s view is indefensible. Greco was right that we can think about the value of knowledge in terms of the value of achievements. He was wrong, however, to think that achievements are always good. It turns out that knowledge, like achievements, are not generally good either and these two points are related. It is not good to know when knowing would be imprudent, when it would be morally dubious, unpleasant or when, and this is the vastest category, it would simply be pointless. Similarly, succeeding, because of one’s abilities, in a stupid project, exercising one’s abilities in pursuit of the bad and the wicked, having creditable success in the absolutely pointless has nothing to be said for it. The fact that these criticisms of Greco’s view run parallel confirms the basic idea of the virtue epistemological approach. The practical might still be able to illuminate the theoretical. There are two ways in which this idea can be pursued further.

I think it is not always good to know. Nevertheless, I accept a restricted value-of-knowledge problem. What we need to explain is why, when we are interested in a subject matter, and legitimately so, we want to know how things stand and not merely have a true belief about them? Why do we prefer knowing to believing truly in matters of interest? I have defended the idea (Piller 2009) that when we know we believe as we ought to believe and that, generally, when we do something to achieve an end we want to do what we do well because, thereby, we maximize our active involvement in what is going on. I see the conditions of theoretical as well as of practical rationality as determining what it is to believe and to act well. To satisfy these conditions, which I see as independent deontological requirements, is something we want. Thus, I agree with the virtue epistemological method of trying to illuminate the value and normativity of believing and knowing by regarding them as instances of general phenomena which are at home in the practical domain. Knowing that *p* is better than believing truly that *p*, when the question whether *p* or not-*p* is a legitimate concern, because in knowing we believe with justification and, thus, believe as we ought to believe. Thereby we satisfy our concern for active involvement because in doing things well we minimize our dependency on luck in the achievement of our aims. To know is a conditional good; it is conditional on the legitimacy of our interest in the question we are trying to answer.

A second route to answering the value-of-knowledge question is taken by Sosa. Knowledge, for Sosa, is apt belief, i.e. a belief the truth of which is saliently explained by an agent's competence. Like Greco, Sosa thinks that via a parallel to action this account tells us something about the nature of epistemic value and epistemic normativity. Unlike Greco, however, he accepts the point I emphasized in section 2, namely that knowledge need not always be good (or good for the person who has it). There is knowledge not worth having. There is no point in counting the blades of grass, even if doing it carefully would give us knowledge. How then should we understand epistemic normativity and value? Sosa's answer seems to be: epistemic value has to be understood attributively. '... the supposed normativity of epistemology seems rather like the normativity of a good gun or a good shot. This normativity is restricted to the sphere of guns and shots in some way that isolates it from other important concerns, even from whether there should be guns at all, or shots. ... If ours is the right way to understand such normativity, then in speaking of a justified belief we are saying something rather like "Good shot!" which someone might sincerely and correctly say despite being opposed to gun possession and to shooting' (Sosa 2007, 66). It need not have been a good thing to shoot even when the shot was excellent.

Here is not the space to engage critically with Sosa's theory. Nevertheless I want to end by raising a general concern about the idea of founding epistemic value and normativity on attributive goodness. The fact that we talk about the category of epistemic value suggests by itself that we are after a predicative notion of goodness. When we divide the good in values of various kinds, we usually think about the good in predicative terms. Liberty and equality of opportunity are political values; it is how the good comes to us in the field of politics. Honesty and loyalty are moral values which determine the good of social interaction. Creativity and sensitivity are personal values; harmony and beauty are how the good comes to us in experience and so on. Compare this to attributive goodness. There are good cars and there is good gardening; however, we do not talk about automotive or gardening values. If we call understanding and knowing 'epistemic values', this seems to suggest that in understanding something we realize the good in the domain of doxastic states. Thus, the way we talk about epistemic value raises the doubt whether a purely attributive notion can deliver an account that would fit our pre-theoretic demands and commitments that are in play when we rely on theories of epistemic justification.

Calling someone unreasonable is not the same as finding out that someone fails to share one’s sensibility as a ‘belief-connoisseur’. Epistemologists mean to talk to a wider audience than those who signed up for this rather peculiar connoisseurship – they mean to talk to all of us.

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