

KNOWLEDGE AS A MENTAL STATE AND THE TERTIARY VALUE PROBLEM FOR KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Duncan Pritchard identifies three value problems for knowledge: primary, secondary, and tertiary. While the primary and secondary problems concern whether knowledge has a greater value than true belief (primary) and whether knowledge has a greater value than anything else that falls short of it (secondary), the challenge of Pritchard's tertiary problem is to explain why knowledge is of a different *kind* or *quality* of value than what falls short of knowledge.

According to Pritchard, the primary and secondary value problems will be solved if we find a solution to the tertiary value problem (Pritchard, *forthcoming*, p. 6). Yet, if we accept the tertiary problem as Pritchard presents it, I argue that we will not be able to solve the primary and secondary problems since if we accept that knowledge has a different kind of final value it becomes incommensurable with the final value of what falls short of it. I will argue that we need to revise the tertiary problem to concern the problem of how to explain why knowledge is a different kind of *thing* (as opposed to knowledge having a different kind of final value) than what falls short of it. To solve the revised tertiary problem we need to get away from the view that knowledge is complex (composed of attitudes and environmental conditions such as belief, truth, justification, anti-luck). Instead we have a promising solution to the revised tertiary problem if we understand knowledge as a simple mental state. Considered as a mental state, we can answer how knowledge can be a different thing than what falls short (say, justified true belief), but the question of value will be left entirely to the primary and secondary problems to address. Finally,

I will consider what I take to be the strongest objection to the claim that knowledge is a mental state: internalism about mental content. I conclude that it does not defeat this view of knowledge.

Pritchard's View of the Tertiary Value Problem

We have this intuition that knowledge is not just different from what falls short of it in terms of degree but is distinguished from what falls short of it in terms of quality.¹ Once a person has knowledge, she presumably has something different than when she has mere belief. Knowledge is supposed to be a different *kind* of thing than what is not knowledge. Pritchard rightly points out that if we accept the primary and secondary problems as the only value problems (in which knowledge may differ only in degree) then we are left without an explanation for why so much attention has been given to this particular point on the value continuum over the others. So we have a third problem, which Pritchard terms the tertiary problem: how can knowledge be a different kind of value than what falls short of it?

Revising the Tertiary Value Problem

The tertiary value problem means to exclude questions about the instrumental value of knowledge and what falls short. In terms of an all-things-considered value, there are cases in which will clearly have less value than what is less than knowledge.² But the tertiary problem

¹ "Quality" and "kind" are terms that Pritchard appears to use interchangeably. I intend to use them as Pritchard does. These terms appear to be terms of identity or essence which require that we treat objects that differ in "quality" or "kind" as belonging to different categories of essence. Thus, when two things differ in "quality" or "kind" of *value*, they belong to different categories of value which differ in essential ways. Of course, terms such as "identity" and "essence" are also used in different ways and I don't presume to know, beyond what I have stated, how Pritchard would use those terms. Even explaining how I use each term would require the use of other terms which are also used in different ways. Without defining each term in irreducible ways (a controversial task in its own right), I can only hope that one can gain a sense for how these words are used here and in Pritchard's work.

² Consider a case in which a mob boss believes that *S* possesses knowledge that can implicate him in a crime and has put a price on *S*'s head. In this case, *S* might be worse off than if she had a mere belief about the mob boss.

concerns the *epistemic* value of knowledge over what falls short of it. According to Pritchard, knowledge seems to not only have a different *degree* of value but also a different *kind* of value:

It seems that accounting for our intuitions about the value of knowledge requires us to offer an explanation of why knowledge has not just a greater *degree* but also a different *kind* of value than whatever falls short of knowledge. Call this the *tertiary value problem* (Pritchard *forthcoming*, p. 3).

Incommensurability of Values

Pritchard is concerned with the value of knowledge as *final* epistemic value. It is easy to see how knowledge can have more practical or instrumental benefit, but something that is finally valuable is to be valued for its own sake not for the way in which it is useful for leading to or producing something else of value. Things that are instrumentally valuable toward the same end can be compared with one another according to which one contributes most greatly toward that end. But a final value is valuable for its own sake. Thus, we cannot compare one thing that is finally valuable for its own sake with another thing that is finally valuable for its own sake. To do so would require that there is a neutral set of rules for comparing things that are valuable for their own sakes. But I'm not aware of any set of rules for this project, nor do I think there could be any set of rules. When we are talking about the value of something for its own sake we are barring the consideration that the instrumental value that something with final value might have. So with respect to something valued for its own sake its value is terminates with itself. To compare a thing's final value with some other kind of value is to speak of its value with respect to something other than its own sake. Thus, things that differ in kind of final value cannot be compared in terms of final value. For example, the skill of archery and the skill of basket-weaving cannot be compared in value *qua* skill. Each skill has a final value of its own, but we have no way of comparing them. I confess that I do not know how an archer would proceed in producing a reasonable argument that his skill has more final value than a basket-weaver's skill.

So while their value may be compared in terms of some instrumental value (such as which has more entertainment value or economic value)³, they cannot be compared in terms of final value. In cases of instrumental value they share a common standard, namely how they serve that for which they are instrumentally valuable, but in terms of value *qua* skill, they are incommensurable.

The same is true for knowledge and what falls short. If we grant that knowledge has a different kind of value and on this premise proceed to explain why knowledge has more final value than what falls short, we will not be able to give an answer. At the point that knowledge and what falls short have different kinds of final value they become incommensurable. Their values do not have a common standard according to which they can be judged. On Pritchard's project, we are not comparing two different things with the same kind of value, we are comparing things with different types of value and then asking how to explain that one has more value than the other. Whether knowledge has a different kind of value than what falls short is a separate question from whether knowledge has a *greater* value than what falls short. And if knowledge has a different kind of value then we cannot compare it with what falls short in terms of degree of final value.

However, we do compare the final value of knowledge with what falls short of it in terms of the degree – this is just what the primary and secondary problems do. But if we accept the terms of the tertiary problem, as Pritchard frames it, these terms contradict the terms of the primary and secondary problems. That is, if we grant that knowledge has a different kind of value than what falls short of it, then we cannot solve value problems like the primary and secondary problems which are premised on knowledge having a higher degree of the same the same kind of value as that which falls short of it.

³ Presumably, archery has more entertainment value and basket-weaving has more economic value.

Since we do compare the value of knowledge with the value of what falls short of it, the value of each is not incommensurable with the value of the other. And so we should reformulate the tertiary problem to leave off talk of a difference in the *kind* of value.

But we still have this intuition that there is something different about knowledge besides having a greater degree of value. Surely whatever separates knowledge from true belief isn't that knowledge has *more* of whatever true belief has. I suggest that we think of knowledge as a different kind of *thing* with the same kind of *value* to a different *degree*. While two things that have different kinds of value cannot be compared in terms of final value, we may compare two different kinds of *things* in terms of the degree of the same kind of final value.

Now, we may succeed in showing that knowledge is a different kind of thing than what falls short (as opposed to just a different degree of the same thing) and still not have an answer to whether it has a greater value than what falls short. So with regard to the taxonomy of the value problems I propose that we relegate all talk of value to the primary and secondary problems and frame the tertiary problem as: 1) how to explain our intuition that knowledge is a different kind of thing (and not as how to explain that it has a different kind of value since when framed this way we face the incommensurability problem); and 2) to explain why so much attention has been given to one point on the value continuum. Once we have answer to the first prong of the tertiary problem, the second prong has an easy answer: we have given so much attention to this point on the value continuum because we knowledge is a different kind of thing than what falls short of it. Clearly, solving the revised tertiary problem isn't as consequential as solving Pritchard's tertiary value problem. But part of Pritchard's tertiary value problem was based on a false problem which we dissolved on our way to the revised tertiary problem. So solving Pritchard's problem is more consequential only when we accept a false problem. It remains an important task to explain

how knowledge can be a different kind of thing than what falls short of it and to explain why we focus on one point on the continuum.

If we revise the tertiary problem as I have proposed then it does not address whether knowledge is of greater value than what falls short of it – a concern of Pritchard’s version of it. But Pritchard’s mention of the degree of value in the tertiary problem is a redundancy. This question is fully covered by the primary and secondary problem so it is not necessary that we make a concern of the tertiary problem. We are now in a position to explain why knowledge is a different kind of thing than what falls short of it and why so much attention is given to a particular point on the value continuum.

Complex Knowledge

Most attempts to define knowledge treat knowledge as complex, beginning with belief and truth as basic ingredients in knowledge. Other attitudinal and environmental ingredients are added in order to come up with knowledge and avoid the many problem cases that a particular view of knowledge faces. This makes knowledge reducible to and analyzable in terms of what comprises it. At present, no uncontroversial, non-circular explanation of the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge has ever been proposed on this account. Yet even if a satisfactory complex account were proposed it would still be susceptible to our revised tertiary problem. Knowledge cannot be a different kind of thing than what falls short so long as it is analyzable in terms of its parts. We can see this more clearly by looking at the way a complex accounts seek to give us an account of knowledge.

Since true belief is often taken to be necessary but not sufficient for knowledge, ingredients are added to avoid mental and environmental problem cases for knowledge. A complex account avoids problem cases by adding ingredients. So we may avoid or solve problem

x by adding I_1 and avoid or solve problems y and z by adding more ingredients (I_2, I_3, I_4, \dots). Each ingredient is needed to avoid a particular problem case but it will be irrelevant for avoiding others. Suppose we continue on this way and acquire all the necessary ingredients minus I_n . We will have said what is necessary to have knowledge under all scenarios except the cases that I_n would solve. On a complex account, then, we face a dilemma: if we lack I_n , we simply have knowledge to a lesser degree since we still have every other ingredient, yet, because I_n is a necessary ingredient, when we lose it we lose knowledge. And so without all the necessary ingredients what we are left with is a different kind of thing from knowledge. The way in which complex views typically go about solving problems will not work for the revised tertiary problem. It cannot be solved by adding another ingredient that avoids it. The tertiary problem isn't a problem for complex accounts because they don't have enough complexity; it is a problem for complex accounts precisely because they are complex.

Williamson's Account of Knowledge as a Mental State

So we may avoid the tertiary problem if we can give an account of knowledge that doesn't treat it as an advanced form of belief. Timothy Williamson has proposed an account of knowledge as a simple mental state. As a mental state it is a different kind of mental state from belief. We need to answer two questions: what does it mean that knowledge is a mental state; and how is it different from belief mental states?

When we speak of true belief we are referring to something that is partly internal and partly external to the believer. Truth is what is external and belief is what is internal. To be in a belief state is to have the attitude of believing a proposition. The proposition will have a truth value depending on what is true about the world. This has been the standard approach in the history of epistemology. The standard approach has typically conceived of knowledge as being

in a belief state while satisfying some other non-internal condition. But on Williamson's account, knowing is not comprised of a belief state it is its own mental state, and thus is a different kind of mental state than believing. It is its own propositional attitude (Williamson 2000, p. 6).⁴ Broadly stated then, knowing as a mental state means that when one knows p one's total mental state is different from when one believes p .

Obviously, however, every time we know something we also believe it. This is what leads us to think that believing is part of knowing. Williamson points out that while knowing entails believing, it is only trivially true. What makes it trivial is that the statement is circular. If one knows p only if: one believes p ; p is true; and it is the case that, necessarily, if one believes p and p is true then one knows p . The definition is included as one of its parts. It is a trivial statement. This will be true even if we add other conditions for knowledge (Williamson 2000, p. 6).

The more significant problem is not explaining how knowing can be a mental state but explaining how it differs from a belief state. What separates belief from knowledge seems to be only something different about the outside world. In the case of knowing p and believing p the propositional attitude appears to be the same. Taking knowing and believing as the same mental state depends upon an internalist claim about mental content. Internalism about mental content broadly states that: for all cases in which S_1 is in internal physical state a and mental state K , if S_2 is in internal physical state a , S_2 will also be in mental state K . In other words, the mental state is identical to the total internal physical state. Applying mental content internalism to the claim that knowing is a mental state we may offer the following argument against it.

(IC) If one is in mental state A and one knows p , then each case in which one believes p , one is in mental state A .

⁴ A believing mental state may accompany a knowing mental state, but it is not part of the knowing mental state. It is its own separate simple mental state.

Endorsements of this view come from Jaegwon Kim (1993) and Stephen Stich (1975). Stich states it clearly when he says that “what knowledge adds to belief is psychologically irrelevant” (Stich 1975, p. 574).

If (IC) is correct then knowledge is not a unique mental state. But if (IC) is false then a significant objection to the claim that knowing is a mental state is defeated. One way to proceed against (IC) is to argue in advance arguments in favor of mental content externalism, and another way is to simply offer counterexamples to (IC). We will proceed along both lines.

Consider that if knowing p and believing p have the same mental states as (IC) maintains, then we are subject to the following counterexamples. It is possible to falsely believe something but not to falsely know something. And the mental content in these cases will be different. One can be in a mental state of believing that it is Wednesday even though it is Tuesday, but being the mental state of believing that it is Wednesday though it is Tuesday is incompatible with knowing that it is Wednesday. One can only know that it is Wednesday when it is Tuesday. In this case, knowing that it is Wednesday when it is Tuesday is a psychological impossibility while believing that it is Wednesday when it is Tuesday is not a psychological impossibility. Notice that this argument does not need to invoke mental content externalism. On mental content internalism one will of course argue that there is no difference in mental content when one knows that it is Wednesday on a Wednesday and believing that it is Wednesday on a Tuesday. The difference is only the timing of the belief. Suppose then that we bolster (IC) by adding a truth condition and end up with (ICT):

(ICT) If one is in mental state A and one knows p , then each case in which one believes p truly, one is in mental state A .

By adding a truth condition, we avoid the previous counterexamples. But now we still face counterexamples in which S_1 believes truly that p for false reasons f and S_2 knows that p on the

basis of right reasons r . Since f is uncontroversially part of S_1 's mental content and r is uncontroversially part of S_2 's mental content, believing truly that p has different mental content from knowing that p . Believing p will always be too broad to have the same mental as knowing p since knowing p excludes believing p for sufficiently irrational and confused reasons.

Furthermore, by adding the truth condition one is giving up giving up mental content internalism which is supposed to keep us from accepting that knowing can be a mental state. Whatever arguments will separate the mental state of believing p from believing p truly will also work for separating the mental state of believing p (truly) from the mental state of knowing p .

Suppose we avoid the problems with (ICT) by removing the truth condition and adding a sufficient rationality condition. This condition does not necessitate that the content of mental states be true but necessitates that it be rational.

(ICR) If one is in mental state A and one knows p , then each case in which one rationally believes p , one is in mental state A .

Counterexamples arise here as well. S_1 rationally/justifiably believes that p for reasons f and S_2 knows that p for reasons r . While f is sufficient to justify S_1 's belief that p it may not be either necessary or sufficient to know that p . Suppose that Bob forms the belief that Ulysses S. Grant was a bearded U. S. president on Willie's testimony. However, Willie means to deceive Bob about Grant's facial hair but, lucky for Bob, Willie mistakenly believes that Grant was a clean-shaven U. S. president and so tells Bob that Grant was bearded. Johnny also believes that Grant was bearded but his environment was conducive to knowledge and he saw a picture of the bearded Grant. Because the reasons are part of the mental content and because their reasons differ from one another, Bob and Johnny differ in their mental content. So knowing and rationally believing are different mental states.

Let us consider one more revision to this objection. It is only slightly different from (ICR) which was vague regarding the question of epistemic internalism and externalism. The counterexample to (ICR) satisfied internalist requirement by having access to the reasons for the belief. But suppose we take an epistemic externalism approach while denying externalism about mental content. This would give us:

(ICER) If one is in mental state *A* and one knows *p*, then each case in which one rationally believes *p* on epistemic externalist conditions, one is in mental state *A*.

(ICER) only requires that one avoid irrationality and says nothing about reasons one has for believing *p*. Does (ICER) show that the mental content of a rationally believing *p* is the same as the mental content of knowing *p*? I think not. Permit another counterexample. This one will have to be a different kind than previous counterexamples which capitalized on the obvious difference in the internal content of either the belief itself or the reason for the belief. For (ICER) to defeat the claim that knowing is a mental state we have to say that the only difference between someone rationally believing *p* on epistemic externalist conditions and knowing *p* is some external state of affairs. Can we say that what knowledge adds to rational belief on epistemic externalist conditions is psychologically irrelevant? Here I think we need to finally invoke mental content externalism if we are to distinguish between the mental state of the externally rational belief that *p* and knowing that *p*. While one in an epistemic external rational state is functioning properly internally, mental content externalism says that the internal state is not all that there is to a mental state.

I am sitting at a baseball park on a sunny afternoon enjoying a game. You are sitting in an enclosed room with electrodes on your head that are feeding impulses to your brain to have the same internal perception content that I do. You are not failing to conform to rationality (though you may not have access to the grounds of your rational belief). On mental content internalism

you are in the same mental state as I am. What makes the difference is our environments. But your internal state fails to relate properly to your environment and this is a feature of both your environment and your mental state. They fail to interface. My internal state properly interfaces with my environment and so this says something not just about my environment but also my about mental content. The way in which the internal content is formed makes it a different mental state.

It is not just mental states that can differ when two people are internally the same. Physical states can differ in this way as well. Suppose that I have a mosquito bite. You on the other hand are the subject of a scientific study about mosquito bites and have a flesh wound that is a perfect reproduction of a mosquito bite differing in no way internally. But mine is a mosquito bite and yours is not because to have a mosquito bite requires that you have been bitten by a mosquito. What makes your wound a different kind of thing is something not just something about the environment but something about the relation between the wound and the environment. Presumably environments will differ. My authentic mosquito bite happens outdoors at a picnic 1,000 feet above sea level at 75°F. Yours happens in a laboratory 500 feet below seal level at 65°F. But these are irrelevant environmental factors for whether mine is a mosquito bite and yours is not. It not, then, simply that the environmental factors differ; there is a different relation between the internal and external properties.

This difference then is not just a difference on the part of the environment (like being at various sea levels) but a difference on the part of the internal properties as well. The same holds true for mental states. It is not enough to say that the difference between rationally conforming belief and knowledge is something different about the environment. The environment can vary in all kinds of ways and not affect whether one is in a state of rationally believing or in a state of

knowing. What will make the difference is the way in which the two relate to one another, and as I have said this means something about both the environment and the internal content.

Consider a case that Williamson raises (p. 23) in which N. N. knows that Lincoln is the president. Later on Lincoln is assassinated but N. N. has not heard this news. Since Lincoln is dead, he is no longer president. Thus even though N. N. has the same content internally he no longer has knowledge. Murali Ramachandran takes this case to indicate that because the change in the truth value of N. N.'s internal content has no effect on her consciousness that it doesn't seem that it would cause a change in mental state. Furthermore, if none of her other propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, fears, etc.) are affected this seems to suggest that knowledge is not a propositional attitude or mental state (Ramachandran 2006, p.195).

Notice, however, that something about N. N. does change internally. When N. N. fails to know that Lincoln is president it is a failure not only of the environment to conform to her propositional attitudes but also a failure of her propositional attitudes to conform to the environment. While, strictly speaking, the internal content is the same, the mental state that she is in changes. The timing of the internal content is a factor for making the mental state. And its timing is something different about the internal content and not just the environment. Being in a state at one point in time can be a state of knowing. Being in the same internal state at another can change one's mental state.

Because of the relational factor between internal and external content we cannot chalk up the difference between external rational belief that p and knowing that p to environmental differences. Is the scenario in which I am at a ball game and you are in a scientist's lab just a difference in external environments? Doesn't the relational factor between the internal content and external environment make a difference in the internal properties as well? My internal

content has the property of being formed by a ball park and all that goes along with it, yours has the property of being formed by the work of a scientist and not a ball park. This difference is something about the external environment *as well as* our internal content.

There is a difference in the internal content of an externally rational belief that *p* and knowing that *p*. Return to Williamson point that belief is too broad to have the same mental content as knowledge. The same point applies here, I think. Relation to an external environment brings about certain internal properties. The external environment will be able to change these internal properties in broad ways in the case of externally rational belief that *p* but how many ways in which the external environment can change internal properties in the case of knowing that *p* will be much narrower. We may say then that if, as the external environment changes, the internal properties change accordingly then we will have different mental content. And if we have difference in mental content then we have different kinds of mental states. This means that a knowing state will be unanalyzable in terms of a belief state. Belief then is not an ingredient in knowledge. More will need to be said on whether a knowing state has *more* value than a belief state, but we may leave this work for solutions to the primary and secondary problems. Meanwhile, we potentially have an explanation as to what makes knowledge a different *kind* of thing from belief. I contend that this latter is the tertiary problem proper. As I argued previously, the question of the degree of value comes apart from the kind or quality question. Even if we should answer why knowledge is more valuable we should still want to discover what accounts for our intuition that knowledge is different in ways besides degree of value. Pritchard, the primary framer of the tertiary problem, fails to make this important distinction.

The Buck-passing Argument

I want to briefly consider a final argument against the claim that knowing is a mental state. It is more pragmatic in nature. The argument states that by using the claim that knowing is a mental state to provide a solution to part of the tertiary problem, we are only shifting problems and debates. Assuming that we escape the tertiary problem (or at least part of it) we do so only by jumping into debates about mental content. In other words this solution to the tertiary problem only passes the buck. The buck-passing argument doesn't challenge the truth of our claim about knowing as a mental state, but challenges whether it is ultimately beneficial. I think several things can be said in answer to the buck-passing argument.

First, a solution to the tertiary problem is the benefit we have been considering here but it is only one of the potential benefits of knowledge as a mental state. So the potential of solving numerous problems by taking on another problem is a trade-off worth exploring. Second, there are good arguments against internalism about mental content and I think they are more convincing than proposed solutions to the tertiary problem that draw a distinction between knowing and understanding.

Third, this is often the way philosophy proceeds in solving problems. Sometimes we find that two separate problems have a mutual interest in the same debate (even if for different reasons). Since the mental content internalism/externalism debate exists with or without our interest in the debate, the more problems we can put on the back of one debate the better. We should expect to see the trend continue of epistemology and philosophy of mind coming together more and more around the same problems.

Conclusion

The tertiary problem as Pritchard presents it is confused. If we follow my recommendation to revise it by leaving out talk of knowledge having a different kind of value,

then we have hope of solving it. Knowledge does not have a different kind of epistemic value. If it did, it would create an incommensurability problem and we would be unable to compare it to the other kind(s) of epistemic value. Though I didn't say so above, I think that the incommensurability problem becomes a bigger problem than Pritchard's original tertiary value problem. On this revised tertiary problem, we attempt to explain our intuition that: 1) knowledge is a different kind of thing than what falls short of it, and having understood that knowledge is a different kind of thing we can explain why: 2) the history of epistemology focuses so heavily on knowledge over that which falls short of it.

I argued that we cannot explain either issue if we take a complex knowledge approach. While a simple knowledge approach might solve the revised tertiary problem, it can only do so if we can put forward a viable account of simple knowledge. I think that there Timothy Williamson's approach offers us a promising option. I defended its promise by showing that the greatest objection to it, namely, mental content internalism, is a failed defeater.

Lastly, I considered a pragmatic argument that even if an account of simple knowledge like Williamson's gives us a solution to the tertiary problem it pushes us into to debates in other territory. I show that consolidating debates is a positive thing and that this is often the way philosophy proceeds in solving problems. Furthermore, a solution to the tertiary problem is but one benefit that comes from a simple knowledge account. The more benefit we get from this account the more it outweighs any debates through which it must wade. In the end, I think we are left with a better approach to the tertiary problem and a promising solution to it, which I take to be a worthwhile gain.