

THE ROAD TO LARISSA

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Abstract

In the *Meno*, Socrates asks why knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief. The answer he proposes is ingenious, but it fails to solve the puzzle, and some recent attempts to solve it also fail. I shall argue that the puzzle cannot be solved as long as we conceive of knowledge as a kind of belief, or allow our conception of knowledge to be governed by the contrast between knowledge and belief.

§1 Traditionally, the story that opens chapter three of Genesis is called *The Fall*. But in his remarkable series of lectures, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, David Daube argues that it should be called the story of the Rise. Adam and Eve, he says, are ‘probably among the earliest heroes of civil disobedience’, ethically as well as biologically the ancestors of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King. ‘It is only if we read [Genesis 3] through late Jewish rabbinical and Christian spectacles that it is about a fall.’

In the Christian tradition, both the traditional name and the interpretation of the story associated with it were made canonical by Augustine’s commentary in *The City of God*. Augustine’s interpretation, although not the name of the story, derives essentially from Paul (*Romans*, 5.12-21). It is as follows.

Before they ate the knowledge-giving fruit, Adam and Eve were, we are told in the last verse of chapter two, “naked and not ashamed”. (According to Augustine, their nakedness was not shameful because “not yet did lust move those members [i.e. the genitals] without the will’s consent”. (*City of God*, 14.17))

The devil, a fallen angel, envious of man’s innocent and unfallen state, chose the serpent to ‘insinuate his persuasive guile into the mind of man’ because ‘being slippery, and moving in tortuous windings, it was suitable for his purpose.’ (14.11) The serpent, Augustine says, ‘first tried his deceit upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance’, (14.11) judging that the man might be more susceptible to

persuasion by the woman than by himself. God had told Adam he would die if he ate the fruit, but Eve was persuaded by the serpent that the threat was empty, and that if she ate the fruit she would herself become like a god. Adam was not persuaded, but he yielded to Eve, 'the husband to the wife, the one human being to the only other human being.' (14.11)

Thus Eve was deceived, whereas Adam, Augustine says, 'sinned with his eyes open.' 'Although they were not both deceived by credulity, yet both were entangled in the snares of the devil and taken by sin.' (14.11)

What sin did Adam and Eve commit? It was the sin of pride. 'The evil act had never been done' Augustine says, 'had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation.' (14.13) The immediate result of their sin was that their eyes were opened, they saw that they were naked, they were ashamed, and they covered the shameful parts of their bodies with fig-leaves.

Augustine acknowledges that it may not be immediately obvious to everyone who hears the story that Adam and Eve committed an act of 'great wickedness' (14.12). But he insists that we should not think that the sin was a small and light one, because it was committed about food. On the contrary, 'obedience is the mother and guardian of all the virtues', and preferring to fulfil one's own will, instead of the Creator's, 'is destruction.' (14.12)

Adam and Eve, Augustine says, 'despised the authority of God'; and God's punishment was that man would henceforth live 'in a hard and miserable bondage [since he had chosen obedience to his own will rather than to God's], doomed in spite of himself to die in body as he had willingly become dead in spirit, condemned even to eternal death (had not the grace of God delivered him) because he had forsaken eternal life.' (14.15) Augustine summarizes his interpretation of the story as follows:

[Adam and Eve] committed so great a sin, that by it human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted also to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death. (14.1)

This is the orthodox interpretation of the story in the Christian tradition, and the canonical interpretation in the Roman Catholic

church. The interpretation in the Jewish tradition has been similar since the rabbinical period – in other words, for the last two thousand years.

§2 Here is what Daube says about the story of the Fall:

In the Greek myth, as Zeus, the highest of the gods, is intent on withholding from man the basic material for civilization, namely fire, Prometheus, a being half-way between the Olympian rulers and the earth-dwellers, steals the forbidden object from heaven and brings it to man. Zeus cannot undo what has been done; he can only inflict dire punishment on the two conspirators, Prometheus and man. The myth reflects an archaic phase in theology when man looks on the gods as opposed to him. Nor can one be surprised that there should have been such a phase seeing that, before the advent of even primitive technology, it must have been very natural for man to feel himself in the midst of a largely inimical set-up. Any gains were to be attained in defiance of the dominant forces around him.

In the Bible, one of the chapters representing this stage is the so-called story of the Fall. It is indeed astonishing that the true meaning should have been successfully suppressed so long . . . Stripped of subsequent interpretation, the narrative reports that Adam and Eve were in a garden, living crudely and mindlessly like the animals surrounding them. 'They were naked and not ashamed' – this, from the wisdom narrator's point of view, was not a blissful Rousseauesque state but a horrible primitivity. However, there was a tree in the garden with knowledge-giving fruit. Only God forbade the couple to eat of it, and he made sure his prohibition would be heeded by threatening them with immediate death if they disobeyed: 'On the day that you eat thereof, you shall assuredly die.' A being half-way between God and man, the serpent, informs them that this threat is empty: the fruit is not death-bringing, not fatal, on the contrary it will open their eyes and make them discerning. So they do eat of it, and indeed God turns out to have been lying. They do not die, and their eyes are opened exactly as the serpent, the Prometheus of the Biblical story, told them. They become discriminating between good and evil, aware of their nakedness – capable of shame. Just like Zeus, God inflicts fearful retribution on the rebellious serpent

and couple, but like Zeus, he must put up with the start of human civilization.¹

Perhaps Daube's suggestion that the story should be called *The Rise* is an exaggeration. It is true that the Hebrew word for fall (*nepilah*) does not occur in the story itself, or in any of the references to it in the Hebrew scriptures. And the story does not seem to describe a change for the worse in human nature. But it certainly does describe a change for the worse in the circumstances in which human beings live, and it explains the most difficult and painful aspects of human life, as well as the origin of civilization. Nevertheless, Daube's interpretation of the story is essentially correct.

First, as Daube says, nakedness was certainly considered shameful by the author of the story, and the community in which it was told and written down. It is extraordinary that commentators continue to miss this point. For example, the *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* on Genesis, published in 2008, tells us: 'Genesis 2 ends in a brief notation about the innocence of the first human couple. Although they were "naked" there was no shame in it.'² But this is not what the verse says. It does not say 'there was no shame in it'; it says, 'And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and not ashamed', which is of course quite different.

Second, there is no mention in the story of the devil. Satan appears in Jewish writings in the post-exilic period, about four centuries after Genesis was composed; and there, in the *Book of Job* for example, he is clearly subordinate to God and unable to act without his permission. Satan emerges as an independent personality, and as the personification of evil, in the first century AD, and the earliest extant statement in Jewish writings that he was responsible for the Fall is by Rabbi Eliezer, in the late first or early second century.

Third, Augustine seems to have believed that what mattered about the serpent is that he is slippery and moves in tortuous windings. In the text, by contrast, he is described as *arum*, which means, crafty, shrewd or cunning. *Arum* does not mean wicked or evil, any more than the Greek word *polymetis*, which Homer uses as

¹ David Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 60–61.

² Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), p. 61.

Odysseus's epithet. One thing that is made clear in the text is that the serpent knows that the humans will not die upon eating the forbidden fruit, but will become 'like Gods, knowing good and evil' (3.5), as God himself acknowledges they have done: 'Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.' (3.22)

Fourth, the orthodox interpretation of the story disregards God's lie. God says to Adam: 'of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' (2.17) The serpent says: 'Ye shall not surely die.' (3.4) And this is true. Ever since Paul, the orthodox interpretation has finessed this point by interpreting 'die' as 'become mortal' or 'become susceptible to eternal death'. But this is unconvincing. 'Die' is not used to mean these things elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. Besides, the creation story does not imply that Adam and Eve were immortal until God punished them for eating the fruit. On the contrary, God expels Adam from the Garden of Eden to ensure that he will not *become* immortal, by eating from the tree of life. (3.22-3)

Fifth, it cannot have been wicked or sinful on the part of Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, because when they ate the fruit they did not yet know the difference between good and evil. It is true that they knew they were disobeying God. The story implies that this is something one can know without yet understanding evil, wickedness or sin. And no doubt this is correct. But disobedience in a state of moral innocence or ignorance, even deliberate disobedience – for example, by young children – is not evil, wicked or sinful, regardless of whom one disobeys.

Sixth, knowledge in general, and knowledge of good and evil in particular, are good for human beings. This has always been acknowledged as the greatest obstacle to regarding God's commandment not to eat the fruit as just. The point is too obvious to need detailed exposition, and besides it is set out in *Paradise Lost* in compelling terms, when the serpent advocates disobedience to Eve with consummate forensic skill.³

For all of these reasons, Daube's interpretation of the story must be essentially correct. It is not a story of human sin and just punishment by a just God; it is a story of a deceitful god who is jealous of human progress and visits the most terrible retribution

³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.678ff.

on the man and woman who take the first perilous and defiant step towards civilized human life. It is the earliest affirmation in our culture of the value of knowledge for human beings, and its indispensable place in human life. This is not all the story is about. But it appears to be its main significance, what it was principally meant to teach.

§3 Several centuries after Genesis was written down, Plato presented a puzzle about the value of knowledge in the *Meno*. Plato was not a sceptic about the value of knowledge. He did not doubt that knowledge is the guide we really need, when we are deciding what to think or what to do. But he showed that once knowing is distinguished from merely having right opinion, it becomes difficult to say why. The advantage of knowledge over ignorance, which the author of Genesis was concerned with, is evident, and not hard to explain. But it not so obvious why knowledge is preferable to correct opinion:

Socrates: If a man knew the way to Larissa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not be a good guide?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And a person who had the right opinion as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might also be a good guide, might he not?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And presumably as long as he has the right opinion, he will be just as good a guide as the one who knows – if he believes the truth instead of knowing it.

Meno: Just as good.

Socrates: Hence true opinion is as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is . . . (*Meno*, 97a-c)

This is the puzzle. Knowing is not the same as happening to having the right opinion. For example, no one can know now which team will win the next World Cup. But all over the world there are people who firmly believe that their national team is going to win, and some of them will turn out to be right. They do not know their team is going to win, any more than the others know *their* teams are going to win. The difference is that their belief happens to be true. So knowing must be distinguished from merely having the right opinion, or believing something that

happens to be true. But once we have drawn this distinction, it becomes much harder to explain why we prize knowledge as highly as we do. Considered as a guide to action, true belief appears to be as valuable as knowledge, because the one who knows the truth and the one who merely believes the truth will offer the same advice. So why does it matter what we know?⁴

Here is Socrates' solution. Knowledge, he explains, is more valuable than mere true belief, because true beliefs are like the statues made by Daedalus,⁵ which were so lifelike that they ran away unless they were tied down:

So long as they stay with us, [true beliefs] are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one ties them down by working out the cause [*aitias logismo*]. That process, my dear Meno, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. (Meno 97e-98a)

The interpretation of this passage is controversial, especially the phrase '*aitias logismo*', which I have translated as 'working out the cause'. However, Socrates appears to be saying that what makes a true belief more durable, more stable, is understanding why it is true; and he is certainly claiming that the stability of knowledge is what makes it more valuable than true belief:

Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether. (Meno, 98a)

⁴ Throughout this article I talk in general terms about the value of knowledge, but this should always be read as referring to the questions raised by this passage from the *Meno*: is true opinion as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge? If not, why not? I do not mean to imply that knowledge is always preferable to ignorance, that the advance of science has benefits but no costs, or that every fact is worth knowing. Nor am I concerned, directly at least, with the value of the concept of knowledge, as opposed to the value of knowledge itself. These topics have not always been sharply distinguished (see, for example, Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (Oxford: OUP 1990), pp. 2–8), but they are distinct.

⁵ Cf. *Euthyphro*, 11c. Plato may be making an ironic reference to the opening lines of Pindar, *Nemean* 5: 'I am not a sculptor, to make statues that stand motionless on their base. Sweet song, go on every merchant-ship and rowboat that leaves Aegina, and spread the news . . .'

In sum, Plato's idea appears to be that knowledge involves understanding why the things we know to be true are true; and that understanding this makes us able to hold fast to the truth, and avoid lapsing into falsehood. And that explains why knowledge is more valuable than true belief.⁶

§4 The solution is ingenious, but it is not convincing. In the first place, beliefs that do not have a rational foundation are not necessarily unstable. Some of our most stable beliefs are inculcated in us as children, without being tied down by 'working out the cause' – moral and religious beliefs, for example. The prophets and imams who offer to guide us on the road to salvation generally tell us that they know the way; but even they are mistaken, their beliefs tend to be stable, perhaps because the stabilizing effect can be achieved by merely believing that you have 'worked out the cause'.

Second, the stability of knowledge, and its status as knowledge, are not invariably due to evidence or rational support. Russell and Whitehead completed their proof of the proposition that $1 + 1 = 2$ on page 86 of volume two of *Principia Mathematica*, and perhaps this counts as 'working out the cause'. But it is doubtful whether the proof transformed a belief into knowledge, or made it more stable, and less liable to 'run away'.

Third, knowledge is not uniformly more stable than belief. Since we are forgetful, we lose a good deal of the knowledge we acquire – trivial knowledge, such as the number of coins I have in my pocket, much of the knowledge we acquire when we read a newspaper, and much of the knowledge we acquire at school. Some philosophers maintain that whether the beliefs we acquire by testimony – for example, when we read the papers – count as knowledge or mere opinion can depend on the reliability of the source. And that may be right. But the reliability of the source – as opposed to what we believe about it – will not normally affect how securely we hold on to these beliefs, or how easily they are forgotten, and slip out of our minds.

Fourth, as Edward Craig has pointed out, whether the stability of a person's beliefs is important depends on which beliefs we are considering, and the circumstances.

⁶ I shall not discuss the doctrine of recollection, which Socrates refers to in this passage. See G. Vlastos, 'Anamnesis in the *Meno*', *Dialogue* 4 (1965) pp. 143–67, repr. in Jane M. Day, ed., *Plato's Meno in Focus* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994).

Many beliefs are required for the guidance of single, ‘one-off’ actions under circumstances that will not recur, and once the particular occasion is past there is no obvious value at all in their persistence.⁷

For example, it is important for me to have a true belief now about the time I am due to meet a visitor this afternoon, and the time when I promised to call a friend in Los Angeles tonight. But by next Wednesday, it probably won’t matter whether I have retained either of these beliefs.

§5 For these reasons, Plato’s own solution to his problem is unconvincing, as it stands. And this may make us wonder whether the problem is real. *Is knowledge more valuable than true belief?* Perhaps the idea is an illusion. Perhaps it is part of the mystification of knowledge Wittgenstein criticized in *On Certainty* (§§6 & 12): ‘. . . a queer and extremely important mental state . . . a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact.’ Perhaps it is a nostalgic tribute to a conception of knowledge – Plato’s, Descartes’s – we do not share.⁸

Whatever one may think about these diagnoses, a sceptical attitude to Plato’s problem – in other words, the thought that perhaps there is *no* advantage to possessing knowledge as opposed to true belief – has become quite widespread in the last forty years or so, since the publication of Gettier’s article ‘Is justified true belief knowledge?’, for four main reasons.⁹

First, Gettier showed that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge, from which it follows that knowledge is not necessary for justified true belief. But in that case, why should we care about knowledge? Crispin Wright expresses this thought as follows:

We can live with the concession that we do not, strictly, *know* some of the things we believed ourselves to know, provided we can retain the thought that we are fully justified in accepting them.¹⁰

⁷ Edward Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸ See, for example, Stephen Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 122f.; Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), *passim*; Duncan Pritchard, *Knowledge* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ch. 7.

⁹ See, for example, Jonathan Kvanvig, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁰ Crispin Wright, ‘Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon’, *Mind* 100 (1991), p. 88.

Second, if we seek knowledge, and justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge, how can we seek the extra elusive element knowledge requires? We can seek fresh evidence supporting the hypothesis we favour, and test and interrogate the evidence we believe we already have. But we could not seek the elusive ingredient that distinguishes knowledge from justified true belief, even if we could say exactly what it is. Mark Kaplan makes this point as follows:

All we can do by way of seeking knowledge is seek justified belief and hope that this justified belief will satisfy whatever other conditions a justified belief must satisfy in order to qualify as knowledge.¹¹

It seems to follow that whatever the difference between knowledge and justified belief may be, scientific research, and rational inquiry in general, can simply ignore it. It *can* ignore it, because it *must*.

Third, many of the analyses of knowledge proposed during the decades that followed the publication of Gettier's article made it difficult to understand why knowledge should be more advantageous or more valuable than true belief.

In some cases it is their sheer complexity. For example, Marshall Swain proposed that:

S knows that *p* if and only if

- (1) *p*
- (2) S believes that *p*
- (3) there is a set of reasons, *A*, such that
 - (a) S's belief that *p* is based on *A*,
 - (b) S's believing that *p* on the basis of *A* is justified,
 - (c) S has *A* as a result of at least one non-defective causal ancestry, and
 - (d) if S has any other reasons, *B*, that are relevant to S's justifiably believing that *p*, then S would be justified in believing that *p* on the basis of $A \cup B$.

If this is what knowledge is, can it really matter? Should we care whether someone actually knows something, because all three

¹¹ Mark Kaplan, 'It's Not What You Know That Counts', *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), p. 361.

conditions are satisfied, or merely has a justified true belief, because (3)(d) isn't satisfied? It is difficult to see why.

In other cases it is the specific content of the analysis that makes it hard to understand why knowledge matters. For example, Nozick's proposal (expressed in the jargon of possible worlds and simplified a little) is that:

S knows that p if and only if

- (1) p
- (2) S believes that p
- (3) in possible worlds close to the actual world, S believes that p if p is true, and S does not believe that p if p is false.

Knowledge, as Nozick put it, is belief that tracks the truth.

Now Nozick acknowledged that this analysis is unsatisfactory as it stands, because there are cases where S knows that p despite the fact that in some close possible worlds in which p is false, S still believes that p . So *these* non-actual worlds should not appear in (3). They don't have anything to do with the difference between knowledge and mere true belief. But suppose we succeeded in defining a set of possible worlds W that appeared to make the analysis watertight:

S knows that p if and only if

- (1) p
- (2) S believes that p
- (3) in W , S believes that p if p is true, and S does not believe that p if p is false.

If this were what knowledge is, it would be hard to see why knowledge is more valuable than true belief. It is obvious that I want my beliefs, and the beliefs of others I rely on – the guide who shows me the way to Larissa, for example – to be true in the actual world. But why does it matter whether my beliefs are true in possible but non-actual worlds? Why should I mind whether my journeys to Larissa in possible but non-actual worlds – the journeys I *could* take but *don't* take – end in the right place? For all I care, they can take me to Crawford, Texas or Guantanamo Bay.¹²

¹² A similar argument applies if we distinguish between close and distant possible worlds. For I am no worse off if I narrowly escape disaster than if I escape it by a wide

The fourth reason why epistemology post-Gettier has encouraged the thought that knowledge may not be more valuable than true belief is that most of the vast literature addressing Gettier's puzzle about knowledge sought to capture the idea that if we know the truth we do not believe the truth fortuitously or by luck. But benefits are not worth any less because they were gained fortuitously or by luck. We may admire a man less for winning the lottery than for inventing the bagless vacuum cleaner, but pound for pound their fortunes are worth the same.

§6 To summarize the main points covered so far: First, Plato's proposal is that 'Once [true beliefs] are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is more valuable than true opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether.' But this is unconvincing for four reasons. (i) Beliefs that do not have a rational foundation are not necessarily unstable. (ii) The stability of knowledge is not invariably due to evidence or rational support. (iii) Knowledge is not uniformly more stable than belief. (iv) Whether the stability of a person's beliefs is important depends on which beliefs we are considering, and the circumstances.

Second, Gettier's article 'Is justified true belief knowledge?', and the literature it spawned, cast doubt on the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true belief, for four reasons. (i) If knowledge is not necessary for justified true belief, justification cannot be the reason why we should value knowledge more. (ii) We cannot seek knowledge as opposed to justified true belief; so whatever the factor is, which distinguishes between them, scientific research or rational enquiry can ignore it. (iii) Many of the definitions of knowledge devised to deal with Gettier-type cases made it hard to see why knowledge should be more valuable than true belief, either because of their complexity, or because of their specific content. (iv) Believing the truth fortuitously, or by luck, does not diminish the advantage it confers.

I should like to make one further observation about Gettier, before moving on. It is implicit in what I have already said about

margin, assuming I am not aware of my situation in either case. Cf. Edward Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 20. Linda Zagzebski argues, in a similar vein, that reliabilist theories of knowledge make it hard to understand why knowledge should be considered more valuable than mere true belief. See 'What is Knowledge', in J. Greco and E. Sosa, eds., *Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 92–116.

the impact of his article; but it is worth making it explicit. As I said a moment ago, Gettier's article showed that justification cannot be the factor that makes knowledge more valuable than true belief.¹³ But this makes Plato's puzzle more difficult to solve. Ever since Plato, it has not been enough to explain why knowledge is more valuable than ignorance. We ~~need to~~ need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. And since Gettier, it's no longer enough to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. We now need to need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than *justified* true belief. It's as if the dialogue had changed, like this:

Socrates: If a man knew the way to Larisa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not be a good guide?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And a person who had the right opinion *with a justification* as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might also be a good guide, might he not?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: And presumably as long as he has the right opinion *with a justification*, he will be just as good a guide as the one who knows – if he believes the truth instead of knowing it.

Meno: Just as good.

Socrates: Hence true opinion *with a justification* is as good a guide to acting the right way as knowledge is . . .

I do not mean to impy that Gettier moved the goalposts; but he raised the bar. And as we have seen, that makes it more tempting to duck the challenge, and deny that knowledge *is* more valuable than true belief.

§7 I want to return now to Plato's own solution to his puzzle, the idea that knowledge is more durable, more stable than true belief. I've explained why this solution is unsatisfactory, as it stands. But Timothy Williamson defends a qualified version of it in *Knowledge and its Limits*, which I shall consider now.

¹³ Gettier implies that Plato thought justification was the factor that makes knowledge more valuable than true belief; but this is unlikely to be the right interpretation of the passage in *Meno*.

Williamson's immediate purpose in this passage is to argue that knowledge and belief have, as he puts it, different 'causal powers', so that explanations of behaviour referring to knowledge are not equivalent to ones referring to belief. Knowledge, Williamson explains, is less likely to be lost when new evidence comes to light than mere true belief:

One can lose a mere true belief by discovering the falsity of further beliefs on which it had been essentially based; quite often, the truth will out. One cannot lose knowledge in that way, because a true belief essentially based on false beliefs does not constitute knowledge. For example, I might derive the true belief that this road goes to Larissa from the two false (but perhaps justified) beliefs that Larissa is due north and that this road goes due north; when dawn breaks in an unexpected quarter and I realize that this road goes south, without having been given any reason to doubt that Larissa is due north, I abandon the belief that this road goes to Larissa.¹⁴

It is true, of course, that some beliefs are adhered to dogmatically, whatever evidence comes to light. But Williamson claims that *if we are rational*, then knowledge is more durable than mere true belief:

Present knowledge is less vulnerable than mere present true belief to *rational* undermining by future evidence . . . Other things being equal, given rational sensitivity to new evidence, present knowledge makes future true belief more likely than mere present true belief does.¹⁵

This is an ingenious elaboration of Plato's own solution to his puzzle, but I believe it fails, for three reasons.

First, on Williamson's account, as on Plato's, the advantage of knowledge over mere true belief varies depending on how probable it is that the belief concerned will be undermined by the discovery of another truth; and the greater value of knowledge is sometimes negligible (i.e. so small that it can be ignored) because the probability of discovering such a truth is sometimes negligible.

¹⁴ T. Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Second, on Williamson's account, again like Plato's, the advantage of knowledge over true belief only concerns the future, because of course that is what durability is all about. So knowledge that doesn't have a shelf life is no more valuable, as a guide to acting the right way, than mere true belief. Williamson concedes this point, but he argues that it does not represent a shortcoming in his account:

The present argument concerns only delayed impact, not action at the next 'instant'. We do not value knowledge more than true belief for instant gratification.¹⁶

But this is unconvincing. It is true that we do not value knowledge for instant gratification; but we do not value it for deferred gratification either. Knowledge is sometimes gratifying and sometimes painful, and the value we attach to it does not normally depend on which it is. Hence an account, like Plato's or Williamson's, which makes the advantage of knowledge over true belief contingent on what may happen in the future, remains open to the charge that it is unsatisfactory or incomplete.

One might respond to these two points, on Williamson's behalf, by denying that knowledge is more valuable than true belief regardless of the future, by accepting that the difference in value between knowledge and true belief may be vanishingly small, and by insisting that, if we are rational, knowledge is *normally* more durable than true belief. In other words, one might simply insist that this is the best that we can do, or that it is all that it makes sense to attempt.¹⁷ But a third objection shows that even on these limited terms, Williamson's solution to Plato's puzzle fails.

§8 Williamson's solution is that if we are rational, knowledge is less likely to be undermined by future evidence than true belief: knowledge, as he puts it, is relatively robust. Here again is the example I mentioned earlier:

I might derive the true belief that this road goes to Larissa from the two false (but perhaps justified) beliefs that Larissa is due

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁷ As a discussant at the *Ratio* conference pointed out, if someone claimed that marriage is more valuable than cohabitation because it is a more durable relationship, their argument would not be invalidated by pointing out that this is normally but not invariably the case.

north and that this road goes due north; when dawn breaks in an unexpected quarter and I realize that this road goes south, without having been given any reason to doubt that Larissa is due north, I abandon the belief that this road goes to Larissa.

But what does this example really show? Williamson takes it to support the claim that

Present knowledge is less vulnerable than mere present true belief to rational undermining by future evidence.

But this is not quite right. The claim it really supports is that

Present knowledge or mere present true belief whose justification does not include a falsehood (NFL, i.e. no false lemmas) is less vulnerable than present true belief whose justification does include a falsehood (FL) to rational undermining by future evidence.¹⁸

Williamson is right to say that ‘a true belief essentially based on false beliefs does not constitute knowledge’. But a true belief *not* essentially based on false beliefs may not constitute knowledge either. So the example really supports the claim that *either* knowledge *or* mere true belief NFL is more valuable than true belief FL. But it does not support the claim that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief *sans phrase*.

I stated this objection quite abruptly, so I shall present it again, in a slightly different way.

We have already seen that Gettier made Plato’s puzzle more difficult to solve. He showed that it isn’t enough to explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief: we need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than *justified* true belief. As I put it earlier, he raised the bar. Then, when the post-Gettier industry got going, each time a more exacting set of conditions for knowledge was shown to be insufficient the bar was raised by another increment.

¹⁸ In fact we need a further qualifying phrase: *as long as there is some chance that the falsehood will come to light*. There may be falsehoods that can never come to light. For example, Goldbach’s conjecture, that every even number is the sum of two prime numbers, is true but unprovable, its contradictory is an undiscoverable falsehood.

One of the times this happened was in the early 1970s, when a number of philosophers pointed out that Gettier's counter-examples to the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief are cases where a falsehood fortuitously justifies a truth, and claimed, on the strength of that observation, that knowledge is true belief NFL. But counter-examples – that is, examples showing that true belief NFL is not sufficient for knowledge – sprung up in the literature like mushrooms, which meant that the new thesis about knowledge failed.¹⁹

But it also meant that Plato's puzzle became even more difficult to solve. Because it showed that it isn't even enough to explain why knowledge is more valuable than *justified* true belief: we need to explain why knowledge is more valuable than true belief NFL. As we have seen, Williamson's example sets knowledge on a par with true belief NFL. So of course it fails – that is, it fails to explain why it is better to know the road to Larissa than to have the right opinion, *whatever* kind of justification for the opinion we may have.²⁰

Thus Williamson's and Plato's solutions fail for similar reasons. First, both imply that the advantage of knowledge over mere true belief depends on how likely it is that a truth which would undermine the belief will come to light. Second, neither solution explains why knowledge without a shelf life is more valuable than mere true belief. Third, Plato fails to explain why it is better to know than to have the right opinion, however stubborn the opinion is, whereas Williamson fails to explain why it is better to know than to have the right opinion, however free from the taint of falsehood the justification for the opinion is.

§9 Plato's puzzle about knowledge and true belief is surprisingly difficult to solve; and this makes it tempting to abandon the idea that knowledge is more valuable than true belief. The conviction that knowledge – fruit of the 'Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving

¹⁹ R. Feldman, 'An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counter-Examples', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 52 (1974), pp. 68–69; R.K. Shope, *The Analysis of Knowing* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), chs. 1 & 2.

²⁰ The same argument applies *pari passu* if we compare knowledge with true belief that fails to qualify as knowledge because of the presence of counter-evidence (Williamson, *op. cit.*, pp. 78–79). Cases such as Goldman's story about barn façades only support the claim that present knowledge *or mere present true belief in the absence of counter-evidence* is less vulnerable than present true belief *in the presence of counter-evidence* to rational undermining by future evidence.

plant' – is a precious thing is an ineradicable part of human culture. But on our journeys to Larissa, and on our longer journeys to our various Ithacas, perhaps it is simply the truth that we value and desire, and it does not matter whether we attain the specially privileged relationship to it we call 'knowledge', as long as we are guided by the truth. In the remaining part of this article, I want to suggest, first, that what we care about, on the road to Larissa, is indeed being guided by the truth, no less and no more; and second, that this very fact about us explains why we prefer knowledge to true belief. So I shall try to reconcile the sceptical sentiment I conveyed a moment ago with Plato's conviction, that knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief, and do justice to both. If this is the right response to Plato's puzzle, the mistake made by sceptics about the value of knowledge (e.g. Kaplan, Kvanvig, Pritchard) and non-sceptics (e.g. Zagzebski, Sosa, Greco, Goldman & Olsson) alike is to force a choice that does not really exist.²¹

§10 The reason why Plato's own solution to his puzzle and Williamson's recent elaboration of it both fail is that the resources they deploy are too limited. In fact they are limited to two elements only: what I do, or shall do, or may do; and what I believe, or shall believe, or may believe. Only action and belief. And this is too limited a repertoire of concepts to explain why knowledge is a better guide to acting the right way than true belief. If we want to solve the puzzle, we need more. And to see exactly what is missing, we need think afresh about what knowledge is. I have written about this in the past, developing the idea, derived from Wittgenstein and Ryle, that knowledge – by which I mean propositional or factual knowledge – is an ability.²²

²¹ Sceptics: for citations see notes 8 and 11; non-sceptics: L. Zagzebski, 'The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good', *Metaphilosophy*, 34 (2003), pp. 12–28; J. Greco, 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief', in M. DePaul & L. Zagzebski, eds., *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: OUP, 2003); E. Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), lecture 4; A.I. Goldman & E.J. Olsson, 'Reliabilism and the Value of Knowledge', in A. Haddock, A. Millar & D. Pritchard, eds., *Epistemic Value* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 19–41.

²² 'How knowledge works', *Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999) pp. 433–451; 'Knowledge and Evidence', *Mind* 115 (2006), pp. 633–658. See also L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), §150; G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), p. 129; A.R. White, *The Nature of Knowledge* (Totowa N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), ch.5; A.J.P. Kenny, *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) p. 109. The idea that knowledge is an ability can be traced to Plato, *Republic*, 477d.

As soon as we think about knowledge in this way our conception of it is transformed, because instead of asking what we need to add to belief to get knowledge, or how knowledge differs from belief, we are forced to ask how knowledge gets exercised or expressed – since this is invariably how abilities are defined. And it turns out that it isn't difficult to say how knowledge gets exercised or expressed. For example, if I know that Larissa is due north, my knowledge gets exercised or expressed whenever the fact that Larissa is due north informs or guides the way I think or act – in other words, whenever it is one my reasons for modifying my thought or behaviour in some way.

The theory of knowledge I have defended is encapsulated in this example. The idea is simply that knowledge is the ability to be guided by the facts. The phrase 'guided by the facts' is a metaphor, of course, but it is a perfectly familiar one. When we talk about being guided by a fact, we mean that we took it into consideration, that it informed our reasoning, when we decided what to think or what to do. So the facts we are guided by are the facts that are our reasons.

Here is how we can arrive at this conception of knowledge in five steps:

- (1) Factual knowledge is an ability.
- (2) An ability is defined by what it is an ability to do (how it is exercised).
- (3) Knowledge of a fact is exercised when the fact guides thought or action.
- (4) A fact that guides thought or action is a fact that serves as a reason (for thinking or doing something).
- (5) Factual knowledge is the ability to do things for reasons that are facts.

This is intended to explain, not to convince. I have tried to defend this way of thinking about knowledge in the earlier papers referred to above. And for present purposes, we only need to rely on part of it – specifically, on the idea that if a person does not know a certain fact, she is unable to do things for that reason. In other words, the fact that p cannot be a person's reason for doing something unless she knows that p . Hence it is not sufficient merely to have the true belief that p . If a person merely truly believes that p , the fact that p cannot be her reason for thinking something or for acting in a certain way.

One simple kind of case that illustrates this principle is where the fact in question is one that cannot be known. For example, it was impossible to know in 1997 which team would win the 1998 World Cup. But suppose Marianne had unshakeable faith in the French team and was perfectly convinced that France was going to win. And suppose she placed a bet of 1000 francs on France to win, for this reason. We know now that France *was* going to win, but we also know that Marianne did not know this when she placed her bet. So, what was her reason for placing the bet? If a fact cannot be person's reason if she merely has the corresponding true belief, the fact that France was going to win was not her reason. And this seems to be right. It seems clear that Marianne's reason for placing the bet was not the fact that France was going to win. Her reason was that she *believed*, or *was perfectly convinced*, that France would win.

If the claim I am relying on is true – if the fact that *p* cannot be a person's reason for doing something unless she knows that *p* – then if I believe, but do not know, that Larissa is due north, my reason for taking the road that leads north cannot be the fact that Larissa is due north, regardless of whether my belief is true. My reason may be that I believe that Larissa is due North, or that Larissa is probably due north, or that a sign indicates that Larissa is due north, or that someone told me that Larissa is due north. But the fact that Larissa is due north cannot be my reason, unless it is a fact I know. The relationship between knowledge and mere true belief is similar to the relationship between perception and veridical hallucination. The man who sees the guide take the road that leads due north, and follows him, is guided by the man he sees; whereas the man who hallucinates is not, even though he follows the same route.

§11 The claim that the fact that *p* cannot be a person's reason for doing something unless she knows that *p* provides a new solution to Plato's puzzle. For we do not only care about what we do, or want, or believe, we also care about our reasons, and in particular, we want our reasons to be facts. There is little reason to hope that we shall ever be guided by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, like the children of Israel crossing the desert to the promised land. But we are sometimes guided by the facts. For example, if we know that the road that leads north is the road to Larissa, then we can take the road that leads north *because* it is the road to Larissa, whereas if we don't know this, we cannot. Hence, we are bound to regard

knowledge as a better guide to acting the right way than mere true belief, because we care whether we are guided by the facts.

I said earlier that I want to reconcile the conviction that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief with the sceptical thought that all we care about is being guided by the truth, and it does not matter whether we attain the privileged relationship to it we call 'knowledge' or not. The solution is simple. True belief, whether justified or not, will tend to influence thought and behaviour in the same way as knowledge does. So the man who has the right opinion about the way to Larissa – the man who believes that Larissa is due north, but has never been there and does not really know – will lead us in the right direction, as Socrates points out. It follows that if all we cared about was getting to Larissa, we would not, or at any rate, should not prefer knowledge to mere true belief. But only the person who knows will be guided by the fact that Larissa is due north – and not merely influenced by his state of mind. Since we care about being guided by the truth, we are bound to regard knowledge as a better guide to acting the right way than mere true belief.

But why do we care about being guided by the truth? Suppose we say that a person who merely believes that p , and uses the proposition that p as a premise, is 'as if guided by p '. Why do we prefer to be guided by the truth rather than to be merely as if guided by the truth? As Hume put it, these questions seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty, from which we have endeavoured to extricate ourselves.

But in fact it isn't the same uncertainty at all. The question is interesting. But it is different from the question we began with, and it has a different answer.

Q1: Why do we prefer knowledge as a guide to action rather than true belief?

A: Because we prefer to be guided by the truth.

Q2: Why do we prefer to be guided by the truth rather than to be as if guided by the truth?

Various answers to this question are possible. One is that we prefer reality to illusion. Another is that we prefer not to be deceived about what our reasons are. To expand on these answers in a satisfying way would take up a good deal more space, particularly because they raise further difficult questions of their own. So

there is, as there always is, more to say. But I believe we have made some progress if we have shown that our conviction that knowledge is more valuable than true belief is consistent with the sceptical thought that all we care about is being guided by the truth; and if we have shown that a plausible solution to Plato's puzzle will have to step beyond the question of what we do and what we believe, to the question of our reasons.

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