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EPISTEMIC DESERT AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

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Whenever a subject knows a proposition, they have a true belief but are also *worthy* of that true belief. In this way, knowledge entails *epistemic desert*. The concept of epistemic desert allows for a simple and elegant solution to the value problem in epistemology. Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because (i) it is good to deserve a true belief and (ii) it is good to have a true belief *and* deserve to have that true belief. There are several significant advantages of this proposal. (1) It allows us to explain the value of knowledge by classifying knowledge as particular kind of valuable phenomena: deserved success. (2) It identifies a distinctive non-derivative epistemic final value that is associated with justification: the desert of true belief. (3) It identifies a consolidating epistemic value. (4) It is consistent with the view that true belief is the fundamental epistemic value.

EPISTEMIC DESERT AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will offer a simple and elegant solution to the problem of explaining why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.¹ Whenever a subject knows a proposition, they have a true belief and are worthy of that true belief. In this way, knowledge entails *epistemic desert*: *S* knows that *p* implies that *S* deserves to believe truly that *p*. Since it is (1) good to deserve a true belief and (2) good to have a true belief and deserve to have that true belief, knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

2. What is Epistemic Desert?

Before examining the concept of epistemic desert, a few things need to be said about desert in general. The concept of desert is one we employ regularly. It is related to a number of other normative concepts. When we say that someone deserves something, we mean in a strong sense that it is *appropriate* for them to have it. That is, it is proper or fitting for them to have it.² Desert claims, in general, are evaluative claims.³ When we say that someone deserves some thing, we are evaluating that person in a certain way. We are saying that it is appropriate, proper, or fitting for them to have that thing.

¹ This is the “value problem” in epistemology. Some representative work in the area includes Zagzebski (1996, 2000, 2003), Jones (1997), Kvanvig (1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2006), DePaul (2001), Riggs (2002a, 2002b, 2004), Sosa (2003, 2007), Percival (2003), Brady (2006), Greco (Forthcoming), Brogaard (2006), and Pritchard (2007).

² The kind of appropriateness or propriety associated with desert is different from other kinds of appropriateness or propriety. According to the rules of poker, it is appropriate for the person with the highest hand to take the pot. Whether that person also deserves the pot, however, is another issue.

³ Kleinig (1971) p. 72

In general, desert claims can be put in the following form which exhibits three⁴ important features⁵:

X deserves *A* in virtue of *B*.

Here, *X* stands for a *deserving subject*, *A* stands for a *deserved object*, and *B* stands for a *desert base*.⁶ The deserving subject is that which is said to be deserving. Deserving subjects can include people, groups, works of art, etc. The deserved object is what is deserved. Deserved objects can include physical objects, treatments, punishments, successes, failures, etc. The desert base is the grounds of the desert. It is the reason why the deserving subject deserves.⁷ Desert bases include performances, omissions, actions, skills, virtues, or some mixture of these. All legitimate desert claims involve a subject, object, and base either implicitly or explicitly. Of course, desert claims are sometimes made that are missing one or more of these components (e.g., “Bob deserves praise” or “Anne is deserving”). Such claims are illegitimate unless the missing components can be specified.

Different forms of desert can be distinguished in virtue of desert bases. Moral desert is a kind of desert that is based in the moral or immoral nature of a subject’s actions and character. In a similar manner, *epistemic desert* is grounded in a subject’s

⁴ Kleinig (1971) argues that some desert claims (“institutionalized” desert claims) involve a fourth component that specifies a source from which the subject deserves the object. This dispenser of deserts (for example, the awarder of a prize, the granter of a knighthood, etc.) occupies this position in virtue of an institutional framework. The need for such a fourth component is questionable. As McLeod (2003) notes, a source can be included in the deserved object. For example, instead of saying “Larry deserved praise” one can say “Larry deserved the praise of his colleagues.”

⁵ In distinguishing three components I follow the accepted tradition which is represented (in part) by Feinberg (1970) pgs. 58-61, Miller (1976) pgs. 117-118, Galston (1980) p. 170, Sher (1987) p. 7, Lamont (1994) pgs. 45-46, Feldman (1995a) pgs. 64-65, and McLeod (2003).

⁶ The term “desert basis” was introduced by Feinberg (1970) p. 58

⁷ Kleinig (1971) p. 73 goes as far as saying “it is logically absurd for *X* to deserve *A* for no reason in particular, or for no reason at all.”

epistemic performances and character.⁸ For example, Mary deserves to believe truly because she is a reliable believer; John deserves to get things right because he correctly inferred from true premises; Abe deserves blame for believing in light of refuting evidence.⁹ Desert based evaluations are not foreign to epistemology. Some epistemologists have claimed that subjects deserve “credit” for their true beliefs.¹⁰ Overall, however, discussions of desert in epistemology are somewhat limited. This is unfortunate because desert is intimately connected with knowledge.

3. Knowledge and Desert

Consider the following case: John is an intellectually virtuous believer with wonderful eyesight. He sees his friend Tom in the distance in normal lighting conditions and comes to believe that Tom is going for a walk. As a matter of fact, John is correct. Tom is going for a walk. John’s case is a paradigm case of knowledge. In virtue of John’s excellent eyesight operating in a suitable environment, it is *appropriate* for him to attain the particular truth he attains. Because of his intellectual performance, it is *fitting* and *proper*

⁸ Epistemic desert can be understood as a species of intellectual desert. Epistemic desert concerns the epistemic grounds of our cognitive attitudes. Intellectual desert, on the other hand, is a broader kind of desert that has to do with a wide range of intellectual accomplishments (and failures). Examples of intellectual desert include deserving a perfect score on an exam, deserving to fail a class, deserving an award in an intellectual competition, etc.

⁹ Of course true believing, getting things right, and blame can also be deserved on non-epistemic grounds. For example, Larry deserves to know that the car has been wrecked because he owns it. Here, desert is grounded in a non-epistemological, but ethically relevant, fact. It is not too difficult to imagine cases where subjects deserve to believe truly, deserve to get thing right, or deserve blame on non-epistemic grounds. This kind of non-epistemic desert, however, is irrelevant to whether a subject possess epistemic desert. For example, Anne may deserve to believe truly that her husband in cheating on her in virtue of her marriage. This non-epistemic desert, however, is irrelevant to whether she is epistemically worthy of true belief. In order for desert to be epistemically relevant, it must be grounded in epistemological facts. Interestingly, there is a parallel with justification. Just as there are many different kinds of desert (e.g., ethical, aesthetic, epistemic, etc.), there are many different kinds of justification (e.g., ethical, prudential, epistemic, etc.). Just as these other kinds of justification are irrelevant to epistemic justification, these other kinds of desert are irrelevant to epistemic desert. Just as epistemic justification can be isolated from these other kinds of justification; epistemic desert can be isolated from other kinds of desert.

¹⁰ Notably, Riggs (2002b).

for him to attain that truth. Furthermore, he *deserves* the truth in this case. He has *earned* it and is *worthy* of it in virtue of his intellectual performance.

From the case of John, we can easily generalize. Whenever one knows, one deserves to get the truth. In this way, knowledge is linked to the concept of desert. We can put this link as follows:

D₁: S knows that *p* only if S deserves to believe truly that *p*.

D₁ specifies a necessary condition for knowledge. Call this the *desert condition*.

According to the desert condition, knowing that *p* requires deserving to believe truly that *p*. The desert condition allows us to offer a simple and compelling explanation for why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

4. Desert and the Value of Knowledge

In epistemology, true belief is of fundamental importance. It is typically understood as the fundamental epistemic value.¹¹ From the epistemic point of view, having a true belief is a valuable and good thing:

EV₁: (SB_{truly} that *p*) is epistemically valuable.¹²

This epistemic value should be understood as non-derivative value. True belief is a fundamental value that does not inherit its value from any other source.

Although true belief is of fundamental value, it is not the only epistemic value.

Desert of true belief is also epistemically valuable:

EV₂: (SDB_{truly} that *p*) is epistemically valuable.¹³

¹¹ DePaul (2001)

¹² Here “SB_{truly} that *p*” should be read as “S believes truly that *p*”

¹³ Here “SDB_{truly} that *p*” should be read as “S deserves to believe truly that *p*”.

Why is desert of true belief valuable? This answer is simple; in general, deserving a good thing is a good thing. Call this the *Value of Desert Principle* or VoD. VoD is true in many different fields of evaluation. In ethics, possessing happiness is good and, hence, deserving to possess happiness is good. In baseball, hitting a homerun is good and, hence, deserving to hit a homerun is good. In the classroom, getting an ‘A’ is good and, hence, deserving to get an ‘A’ is good. That deserving to believe truly is valuable follows from a general evaluative principle. In epistemology, deserving to believe truly is a good because true belief is a good and, in general, deserving a good is also a good.

If the desert of true belief is valuable, we have a simple explanation for why the value of knowledge is greater than the value of mere true belief. If we add the value of true belief to the value of desert of true belief we get a sum that is greater than just the value of true belief. The value of deserving true belief accounts for the difference. This simple explanation, however, misses a crucial point. In knowledge, there is also *fitness* between desert and what is deserved. This fitness has a bearing on the value of knowledge. In virtue of this fitness, the value of knowledge is greater than just the value of true belief and the value of desert of true belief added together.

Fitness is a relation that holds between what one has and what one deserves. There is fitness when one has what one deserves. There is a lack of fitness when one does not have what one deserves.¹⁴ A number of philosophers have argued that fitness has bearing on value.¹⁵ According to Ross, a state of affairs where the good are happy and bad are unhappy is better than one in which the good are unhappy and the bad happy.¹⁶ The former is better because the good and bad get what they deserve while, in the latter

¹⁴ Fitness and lack of fitness can also come in degrees. I will put aside such complications.

¹⁵ Some examples include Ross (1930), Feldman (1995b), and Hurka (2001)

¹⁶ Ross (1930) p. 58

case, they do not. If we assume that the only difference between these cases is the fitness and lack of fitness, then fitness makes a situation more valuable than its absence.

When one has knowledge, one believes a proposition truly *and* deserves to believe that proposition truly. This complex whole is valuable:

EV₃: ($SB_{\text{truly that } p}$ and $SDB_{\text{truly that } p}$) is epistemically valuable.

The complex whole ($SB_{\text{truly that } p}$ and $SDB_{\text{truly that } p}$) is valuable because believing truly is valuable, deserving to believe truly is valuable, and the fitness between having true belief and deserving true belief is valuable. EV₃ falls under a more general evaluative principle because, in general, deserving a good thing and having that good thing is a good thing. Call it the *Value of Good Fitness Principle* or VoGF. VoGF, like VoD, is true in many different fields of evaluation.

5. Merits of this Approach

The solution to the value problem offered by the desert approach is simple and elegant. Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because knowledge involves a true belief that is deserved. Having a true belief that is deserved is better than just having a true belief because (1) it is good to deserve a true belief and (2) it is good that there is fitness between having a true belief and deserving to have that true belief. In addition to its simplicity, there are a number of other significant merits to the desert approach.

5.1 Explanation

The most obvious merit of the desert approach is explanation. The desert approach to epistemic value allows us to classify knowledge as a particular kind of valuable

phenomena. Knowledge can be classified in this way because the desert approach invokes general evaluative principles. Since these evaluative principles are true in other evaluative domains, we can reach a deeper understanding of both knowledge and epistemic evaluation. In the desert approach, knowledge is a species of a more general kind of valuable phenomena. Knowledge is a *deserved success*. It is a good that is constituted by the possession of a good and the desert of that good. Epistemic evaluation is a particular kind of evaluation that is concerned with this kind of deserved success.

By classifying knowledge under a more general kind, our understanding of it is enhanced. Classification allows us to understand knowledge at a different level of generality. Furthermore, it allows us to see that knowledge is similar to other valuable phenomena. When things fall under the same general category, they fall under that category in virtue of being similar. Classifying knowledge is also important because it allows us to understand why certain analogies are relevant to a theory of knowledge. Whether an analogy is relevant to a theory of knowledge depends on whether it involves phenomenon that are valuable in the same way that knowledge is valuable. When such phenomena are valuable in the same way as knowledge, it is because they belong to the same class of valuable phenomena as knowledge. Consider Sosa's archer analogy.¹⁷ According to the archer analogy, having knowledge is like hitting a target through skill.¹⁸ The relevance of this analogy depends on whether having knowledge is good in the same way as hitting a target through skill is good.

It should be noted that the explanation of the value of knowledge offered by the desert approach is not a *naturalistic* explanation. It does not offer an account of how

¹⁷ Sosa (2007)

¹⁸ Another relevant analogy is Greco's (2003) case of Griffey and the pop-fly.

desert supervenes on the natural. In this way, the account is incomplete. Nevertheless, the explanation is an informative one. It allows us to see knowledge in a new and informative way. Compare this with an approach that identifies a property of knowledge not possessed by true belief and insists that it is just valuable. Without an explanation that appeals to more general evaluative principles, there is nothing really convincing that can be said to someone who is skeptical of the purported value.¹⁹ In virtue of being principled, the desert approach allows a response to the skeptic. The skeptic must either reject the general principle or reject that the principle applies in this case. With respect to the values of desert and the value of fitness, such moves do not seem reasonable.

5.2 The Value of Justification

The desert approach to the value of knowledge allows us to understand the value and significance of justification. When a subject deserves something, there are grounds in virtue of which that subject deserves that thing. Desert is always grounded in some fact about the deserving subject. For example, when a subject deserves an “A” on an exam it is in virtue of their performance of the exam. Desert does not float freely.

In knowledge, justification constitutes a desert base. When a subject has knowledge, they deserve to believe truly in virtue of being justified. Justification is the reason why a subject is worthy of true belief when they have knowledge. The relationship between justification and desert can be stated in the following sufficient condition.

D₂: S deserves to believe truly that p if S is justified in believing that p .

If a subject is justified in believing a proposition, they deserve to have a true belief with respect to that proposition. Justification grounds desert. This is why knowledge involves

¹⁹ A similar criticism to such views can be found in Kvanvig (2003b)

a desert condition. Knowledge involves the desert of true belief because justification is necessary for knowledge and justification is sufficient for the desert of true belief.

The connection between desert and justification allows the desert approach to identify a distinctive value associated with justification. Justification is valuable *as the grounds* of desert. Since the desert of true belief is valuable, justification as the base of that desert is also valuable. On the desert approach, justification is not valuable merely as a means to true belief. Rather, it is valuable for its own sake because deserving true belief and being worthy of true belief are valuable for their own sake.²⁰

5.3 Consolidation

The desert approach to epistemic value allows us to understand the concept of positive epistemic status in a way that is independent of justification. Positive epistemic status is to be identified with epistemic desert: being deserving of true belief. Positive epistemic status is not to be identified with justification. Although justification is sufficient for the desert of true belief, it is not necessary. This is because the desert of true belief is *multiply realizable*. It can be grounded in different kinds of phenomena.

Distinguishing the concepts of positive epistemic status and justification is important because, if those concepts are not distinguished, then positive epistemic status

²⁰ Interestingly, if we understand the value of justification in terms of the value of desert we can also account why the value of *justified false belief* is mysterious. Deserving a good, considered as such, is a good thing. The value of deserving a good and failing to have that good, however, is not at all clear. Deserving a good and failing to have that good involves both negative value (lack of fitness and a failure to attain the good) and positive value (desert of a good). These values leave the overall value of the whole puzzling. Is the whole good because the goodness of desert outweighs the badness of failure and lack of fitness? Or, is the whole bad because the badness of failure and lack of fitness outweighs the goodness of desert? Since justified false belief is just a special case of deserving a good and failing to get that a good, it should come as no surprise that similar questions arise with respect to the value of justified false belief. Does the goodness of justification outweigh the badness of false belief or does the badness of false belief outweigh the goodness of justification? The desert account of the value of knowledge allows us to understand this mystery. It arises because there is a more general mystery about the value of desert. A similar account can be offered for the value of *unjustified true belief*.

cannot be associated with something that falls short of justification. Consider believing in accordance with one's intellectual obligations. Believing in accordance with one's intellectual obligations has positive epistemic status even if it does not amount to justification. The desert approach to epistemic value can explain this positive epistemic status. It is epistemically good to believe in accordance with one's intellectual obligations because believing in accordance with one's intellectual obligations makes one worthy of true belief. As a ground of epistemic desert, believing in accordance with one's intellectual obligations is valuable even if it falls short of justification.

By identifying positive epistemic status with the desert of true belief, the desert approach to epistemic value offers a *consolidating* value. It allows us to see that epistemic value is associated with things other than justification. This opens up the prospect of some consolidation in the field of epistemology. Epistemology is marked by the examination of a diverse number of concepts. The desert approach to epistemic value allows us to find some unity within the diversity.

5.4 Truth Fundamentalism

A final advantage of the desert approach to epistemic value is that it advocates *truth fundamentalism* while avoiding *epistemic value monism*. Truth fundamentalism claims that true belief is the fundamental epistemic value. Epistemic value monism is a kind of truth fundamentalism that claims that the only positive non-derivative epistemic value is true belief. Epistemic value monism must be avoided because it is not consistent with the fact that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.²¹ The desert approach to epistemic value advocates truth fundamentalism while avoiding epistemic value monism

²¹ DePaul (2001)

by identifying values that are *dependent* on, but *not derivative* upon, the value of true belief.

Consider “Anne’s taking pleasure in Bob’s pleasure.” The value of Anne’s pleasure does *not* derive from the value of Bob’s pleasure. Anne could feel such pleasure and such pleasure would be valuable even if Bob were faking it.²² Although Bob’s pleasure might have caused Anne’s pleasure, the Anne’s pleasure does not have value in virtue of some instrumental relation to Bob’s pleasure. Although the value of Anne’s pleasure does not derive from the value of Bob’s pleasure, Anne’s pleasure is, in a sense, *dependent* on the value of Bob’s pleasure. If Anne were taking pleasure in Bob’s pain, then her pleasure would not be good. In general, pleasure in a good is good while pleasure in a bad is bad. It is in virtue of the value of Bob’s pleasure that Anne’s pleasure is valuable. In this way, the value of Anne’s pleasure is dependent on the value of Bob’s pleasure. Furthermore, Bob’s pleasure is explanatorily more fundamental than Anne’s pleasure. The value of Bob’s pleasure can explain the value of Anne’s pleasure because Bob’s pleasure is a good and, in general, pleasure in a good is good (and pleasure in a bad is bad).

In a similar manner, the value of the desert of true belief is dependent on, but not derivative upon, the value of true belief. The value of deserving to believe truly does not derive from the value of true belief. Deserving to believe truly would be valuable even if it did not lead to true belief. Notice, however, that the value of deserving to believe truly is dependent on the value of true belief. If one were to deserve false belief, one’s desert would not be valuable. In general, desert of a good is good while desert of a bad is bad. Since true belief is good, the desert of true belief is good. In this way the value of desert

²² If Bob is faking is, Anne’s pleasure is a false pleasure. See Lemos (1994) p. 77-80

depends on the value of true belief. The value of true belief is more fundamental, even if the value of desert does not derive from the value of true belief.²³

As a species of truth fundamentalism, the desert approach to epistemic value is in keeping with a significant intuition about epistemic value. This intuition is that epistemic value is fundamentally linked with true belief. In this way, the desert approach finds a middle road between epistemic value monism and extreme forms of value pluralism that introduce epistemic values that are not connected to true belief. The desert approach offers the best of both worlds: truth-linked epistemic values and non-derivative epistemic values other than true belief.

²³ Additionally, the kind of fitness that is involved in the desert approach to the value of knowledge is also consistent with truth fundamentalism. The kind of fitness that is relevant to the value of knowledge is fitness between desert of the true belief and true belief. It is fitness between truth-linked values. In this way, truth remains fundamental. Although there can be other kinds of fitness, say, between happiness and desert of happiness, fitness is epistemically valuable because it concerns true belief.

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