



## A Virtue – Theoretic Approach to the Concept of a University

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**Abstract:** Virtue epistemologists such as Jonathan Kvanvig and Duncan Pritchard have argued that it is not propositional knowledge but understanding, particularly holistic understanding that has final value or value for its own sake as an epistemic state. Karl Jaspers argues that the overall aim of science and philosophy is to give us a comprehensive understanding or "lucid self-knowledge" of our existence in the world. There seems to be a philosophic overlap between Jaspers and some shades of contemporary epistemology. From both of these points of view, education aims at both the imparting of knowledge and inculcation of understanding among students. In other words virtue epistemology, when applied to education, would aim at developing the epistemic character of students and inquirers. Such a virtue-theoretic approach employed to education, particularly to university education, implies the need for a revival of a broad humanistic view of the university rather than a merely utilitarian one.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; Kvanvig, Jonathan; virtue epistemology; propositional knowledge; understanding; epistemic virtue; science; education; humanistic; university.

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### Introduction

One of the major developments of post-Gettier epistemology is the emergence of virtue epistemology. Ernest Sosa's paper "The Raft and the Pyramid" is normally credited with initiating this turn in epistemology, although some of the earlier work can be and has been thus characterized.<sup>1</sup> The key motivation for this turn of thought was, among other things, a desire to shift focus from Gettier-style problems faced by various definitions of knowledge (in terms of justified true belief plus some added condition) that had been proposed subsequent to the publication of

the Gettier paper.<sup>2</sup> The idea has been either to define knowledge in terms of intellectual virtues and sidestep the Gettier problem faced by justificatory approaches to knowledge, or to completely forget about defining knowledge and focus on various intellectual virtues and their role in our epistemic life in general. The debate among proponents of different approaches within virtue epistemology has been quite productive and, as a matter of course, one of its central aspects has been its focus on what for example Wayne Riggs has called "a value driven epistemology."<sup>3</sup> I say "as a matter of

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5/1 (September 1980), 3-26.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23/6 (June 1963), 121-123.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Riggs, "The Value Turn in Epistemology," in *New Waves in Epistemology*, eds. Vincent F. Hendricks and Duncan Pritchard, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 300-23.

course," for the shift from the traditional epistemology with its focus on definition of knowledge, specifically propositional knowledge, to intellectual virtues is obviously a shift toward values insofar as virtues aim at them.

Given this shift, one of the most important problems that came to be discussed early on was the problem of the value of knowledge. Linda Zagzebsky first raised the problem and subsequently it has been widely debated by epistemologists.<sup>4</sup> In the process of discussions on this issue, some epistemologists such as Kvanvig have concluded that it is the epistemic state of understanding rather than knowledge that has final value.<sup>5</sup> More recently, a similar conclusion has been advocated by Duncan Pritchard.<sup>6</sup>

The phrase "final value" is not to be equated with "intrinsic value." The distinction was originally introduced by Christine Korsgaard.<sup>7</sup> She clarified that a thing has final value when we value it for its own sake. But such final value of the thing in question might have resulted from its relationship with something external to it. An example often adduced in this context is that of Princess Diana's dress. The dress becomes valuable for its own sake owing to its relationship to the Princess. However, intrinsic value is different. As G. E. Moore points out, intrinsic value of a thing "depends solely on the intrinsic nature of the thing in question."<sup>8</sup>

It is in this sense that understanding as an epistemic state has been taken by Kvanvig and Pritchard to be of final value. In other words, it is valuable for its own sake but not intrinsically valuable in the sense of being valuable without any relation to anything external to it.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Trinkaus Zagzebsky, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996. [Henceforth cited as *VM*]

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan Pritchard, Alan Millar, Adrian Haddock, *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010. [Henceforth cited as *NVK*]

<sup>7</sup> Christine M. Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92/2 (April 1983), 169-195.

<sup>8</sup> G. E. Moore, "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," in *Philosophical Studies*, London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1922, pp. 253-75, here p. 260.

The idea seems to be that epistemic states that are of final value may acquire this value from their relation to things external to them.

### Value of Knowledge and Understanding

The value problem in epistemology, as initially characterized by Socrates in Plato's *Meno*, is not the problem as to whether or not knowledge has value for us. It definitely does. It is the problem regarding whether or not knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. Socrates points out in the *Meno* that true belief about the road to Larissa can take one to Larissa just as successfully as knowledge regarding the road to Larissa does. Therefore, we need to ask what makes knowledge more valuable than mere true belief. Why do we take it to be more valuable than mere true belief? This is the question concerning what epistemologists dub as distinctive value of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The idea here is that if truth, belief, and something like justification plus some condition to rule out Gettier-type issues are taken as constituent parts of knowledge, then the question is whether or not knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its constituents.

Kvanvig and Pritchard, among others, have examined this question recently and have come to the conclusion that after all knowledge, though valuable, is not of final value. According to Kvanvig knowledge does not possess value over and above the value of its purported constituent parts and he argues that understanding, with its ability to sate our curiosity, has higher value than knowledge. Pritchard has also argued that understanding is always an epistemic achievement whereas knowledge may not always have this characteristic. As a result, Pritchard concludes that understanding is of higher value than knowledge.

Kvanvig's overall argument in this regard is a sustained effort to show that knowledge is not distinctively valuable. He argues that true belief, as pointed out by Socrates in the *Meno*, is just as good in terms of practical results as knowledge. Therefore, knowledge cannot be claimed to have value over and above true belief (a subset of its constituent parts). Similarly Kvanvig brings to bear the "swamping problem" on the reliabilist's claim that knowledge is

<sup>9</sup> Michael R. DePaul and Stephen R. Grimm, "Review Essay on Jonathan Kvanvig's *The Value of Knowledge and Pursuit of Understanding*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74/ 2 (March 2007), 498-515, here p. 498. [Henceforth cited as *RE*]

reliably formed true belief, for example a true belief formed by reliably functioning perceptual faculties. Yet, Kvanvig points out that reliability of the belief formation process cannot give any additional value to the value of a true belief. In other words, a reliably formed true belief is no different in value from an unreliably formed true belief. The value of truth swamps the value of the reliability of the process.

Kvanvig then argues that subjectively justified true belief, as well as virtuously formed true belief, escape the swamping problem but they are open to Gettier problem. Therefore, subjective justification or virtuosity is not sufficient for knowledge. In addition we need another condition that can effectively block the Gettier problem. But Kvanvig argues that so far we have failed to neatly formulate such a condition. The closer we get to formulate such a condition, the more gerrymandered and convoluted it gets. So even if we succeed in coming up with a condition that effectively blocks the Gettier problem, it will be too convoluted to be acceptable. Hence, the presence of such a condition as a constituent part of knowledge does not clarify how knowledge is more valuable than any subset of its parts. Kvanvig, therefore, concludes that knowledge is not distinctively valuable and it has appeared to be so only on grounds of its neighboring epistemic state of understanding. In fact he agrees with some scholars of ancient philosophy who have argued that the Greek term *episteme* used by Plato is better translated as "understanding" than "knowledge."

Understanding, according to Kvanvig, comes in different varieties such as propositional understanding, understanding-why, and, what he calls, "objectual understanding" which is holistic in character. Propositional understanding is basically a sentence such as "Bob understands that X," where X is a proposition. Understanding-why is an answer to why-questions such as "why did your car break?" In contrast, objectual understanding is the kind of understanding that one talks about when saying, "Bob understands Nancy," or, "Bob understands Physics," and so on. Such understanding involves grasping the overall coherence of one's beliefs on a subject matter and their mutual relations of dependence that, according to Kvanvig, could be logical or probabilistic or causal. It is this type of objectual understanding that Kvanvig takes to be distinctively valuable.

The reasons for the distinctive value of objectual understanding include its lack of vulnerability to the Gettier problem. Kvanvig thinks that such

understanding is immune to Gettier-style luck. Kvanvig's example in this regard concerns a book that is not authoritative but accidentally contains all the true beliefs about Comanche's dominance of the Southern American Plains from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The author is not an expert and just makes up everything by himself. However, he accidentally gets all the beliefs right. According to Kvanvig, a reader of such a book can attain historical understanding with respect to the Comanche's dominance of the Southern Plains despite the fact that unbeknownst to him the book is a complete figment of imagination. As long as the book presents a coherent picture of the events and their dependence relations, and as long as the majority of the beliefs, particularly the core of the system of beliefs, are true, the reader will come to have an understanding of that historical period. Obviously he will not have knowledge of any proposition as the beliefs are Gettierized, in the sense of not being based on an authoritative source. But Kvanvig thinks that understanding is not Gettierized by this kind of luck. In his view understanding involves "grasping" of the relations between beliefs as well as truth of at least the core beliefs. These conditions make understanding more valuable than any subset of its constituent parts and, as such, understanding is distinctively valuable.<sup>10</sup> One's intuition about the distinctive value of knowledge actually stems from the fact that attainment of the state of understanding is in the close neighborhood of the state of knowledge.

It needs to be emphasized that the issue for Kvanvig is the distinctive value of knowledge and not the mere value of knowledge pure and simple. Knowledge is valuable but not distinctively valuable.

Duncan Pritchard argues for a similar position in his recent work (*NVK*). Pritchard believes that a cognitive state of understanding is an achievement that one attains after overcoming some "significant obstacle" or after the "exercise of significant ability." This is what he calls the "strong achievement thesis" (*NVK* 70). Since achievements in terms of such successes are considered to be final and distinctively valuable, understanding is similarly valuable, yet the same holds not true concerning knowledge. This is so because knowledge is not an achievement in the sense in which understanding is. However, some knowledge can be had without overcoming significant obstacles or exercise of significant ability, for example, knowledge

<sup>10</sup> A critique of Kvanvig's position is presented in *RE*.

by testimony or passive perceptual knowledge.

At this juncture, it needs to be noted that Pritchard is talking here about what was referred to above as understanding-why. We gain this type of understanding when we find answers to why-questions. Pritchard's example in this context is: "Why did my house burn?" We normally expect such questions to be answered in terms of the causes or reasons. If a fire company officer tells Pritchard that his house burned down because of faulty wiring, he would thereby understand why the event occurred. Pritchard thinks that this type of understanding is factive, non-transparent, and not immune to a Gettier-type luck that he calls "intervening luck."

Pritchard distinguishes this type of luck from what he calls "environmental luck." Gettier-type luck intervenes between the epistemic agent's abilities and the object of his belief. Using Roderick Chisholm's example, an agent might be looking at a sheep statue while thinking that she is looking at a sheep. Since there is sheep hidden behind the statue, the agent nonetheless comes to form a true belief that there is a sheep in the field. The stroke of bad luck that the agent is looking at a sheep statue rather than a sheep is, in Zagzebsky's words, cancelled out by the the stroke of good luck that there is a real sheep hidden behind the sheep statue.<sup>11</sup> Such a situation is an instance of Gettier type luck. In contrast, environmental luck does not intervene between the agent's abilities and the object of her belief. This is usually explained through the barn façade example constructed by Ginet.<sup>12</sup> An epistemic agent travelling in a county full of barn façades accidentally looks at the only real barn in the area and forms the true belief, "There is a barn in front of me." Given the environment, she could have easily looked at a barn façade rather than the only real barn. In that case her belief would have been false. It is out of sheer good luck that she was looking at the real barn at the relevant moment.

Pritchard contends that such environmental luck is compatible with understanding-why but not with knowledge. So although, for Pritchard, there can be cases in which knowledge and understanding are not coming apart, they nevertheless do come apart occasionally.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Zagzebsky, *On Epistemology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning 2009, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Ginet, *Knowledge, Perception, and Memory*, Dordrecht, NL: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1975.

Hence, overall, both Kvanvig and Pritchard consider understanding to be of higher value than knowledge, albeit at the same time they are emphasizing the value of knowledge. By accepting such a distinction in the goals and values of epistemic activity, it would follow that ideally one should be looking for understanding as being the highest goal for inquiry as well as in education. Of course, this can and should be done along with a pursuit of knowledge. To this end, Karl Jaspers' idea of a university directly encourages this practice of fostering understanding as the highest goal of inquiry and education.

### Karl Jaspers' Idea of a University

Karl Jaspers is one among the few major philosophers who have paid serious attention to the idea of a university. His engagement with this idea stems from his view of human nature and of human existence as well as from his view of knowledge and truth. As he puts it, "The university is the corporate realization of man's basic determination to know."<sup>13</sup> It seems that the pursuit of knowledge for him is an essential part of man's nature. In this regard he is in full agreement with Aristotle's opening line in *Book 1 of Metaphysics*, "All men by nature desire to know." Jaspers position, however, has to be understood in terms of his existentialism that sharply contrasts with Aristotle's essentialism. Jaspers believes that human nature is not a given but is made by humans themselves. Through existence man does not come to be aware of his possibilities only by knowing them but also by turning them into his own reality or being. Hence man's existence is a project that involves the will to know. For Jaspers, the ultimate target of this knowledge seems to be a clear and comprehensive self-knowledge or, what he calls, "understanding." In what follows, I will briefly touch upon this Jaspersian conception of self-knowledge.

In the last analysis Jaspers believes that such a comprehensive and clear conception of self-knowledge is attained by man through pursuit of science and philosophy, a pursuit for which university serves as the institutional platform. In the very first chapter of his *The Idea of the University* Jaspers draws a distinction between a broad and a narrow conception of science. In the broad sense science is a kind of knowledge that

<sup>13</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University*, transl. Harold A. T. Reiche and H. F. Vanderschmidt, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1959, p. 3. [Henceforth cited as *IU*]



is "methodic, cogent and universally valid" (*IU* 7). Seen in the narrow sense, science does not come to being unless sharply demarcated from non-scientific thought. In this sense it is the "science of discovery," it is research. Science in the broad sense pursues truth methodically and in this conception all thought based on rational evidence is scientific. Philosophy also overlaps to a great extent with science in the broad sense but not in the narrow one. The reason is that philosophy aims at a rational understanding of Being as such and, hence, its conclusions do not provide us with objective knowledge. Unlike the conclusions of science in the narrow sense (scientific laws, for example), they also need not make any claims with regard to universal acceptance.

Taken together science and philosophy ultimately give man the sort of comprehensive self-knowledge that can give meaning to his existence. This drive towards a comprehensive self-knowledge or truth regarding our existence in the world can, according to Jaspers, not be implemented without working toward the ideal of the unity of all knowledge. In Jaspers' view the current crisis of the university is actually a crisis resulting from our failure to achieve a unifying understanding of science. Science in the narrow sense, in our times, tends towards fragmentation rather than unity through pursuit of the goals of its sub-disciplines. There is hardly any room in science for work that reconciles and unifies the conclusions of several of its sub-disciplines in order to achieve an overall comprehensive understanding of the world. Jaspers sees this disintegration/fragmentation as a failure on the part of the university to bring together all the disciplines of knowledge and faculties. This failure results from a schism between natural and human sciences as well as from the need for specialized professionals that the university has to meet. Confronting this challenge is an extremely difficult, if not an impossible, task for the university. It requires weaving together all of our modern knowledge into a comprehensive and integrated understanding. That is one reason Jaspers is averse to pursuit of only utilitarian goals in scientific research. Research, he believes, has to be pursued for the sake of uncovering truth.

It is this holistic ideal of knowledge and understanding that Jaspers thinks is the task universities need to achieve. But it should go without saying that such a view of comprehensive knowledge is a far cry from the sort of atomistic propositional knowledge that has remained the traditional focus of contemporary epistemology. The Jaspersian view of knowledge is

actually similar in its nature to what Kvanvig and Zagzebsky, among others, have called understanding. Understanding, for these epistemologists, is holistic, and it involves "grasping" of an overall coherence of one's beliefs as well as of various relations between the components of the subject matter that has been understood. Kvanvig mentions relations such as probabilistic, logical, and causal ones, which also have been called "dependence relations." The point is that such understanding is not a matter of knowing a single proposition. Rather it can involve a whole range of propositions or objects and the relations between them.

The question of whether or not such holistic understanding (or objectual understanding, as Kvanvig calls it) involves knowledge of propositions is a separate matter. Objectual or holistic understanding may or may not involve knowledge as an epistemic state. But this has little bearing on the issue of this essay. The task here is to underscore the comprehensive and holistic nature of understanding as an epistemic state as being elaborated in contemporary epistemology and to point toward its similarities with Jaspers' view of comprehensive self-knowledge as it is yielded in science and philosophy. Jaspers' view of knowledge in this sense is a product of unification of knowledge attained through science and philosophy and it provides us with an understanding of man's position in the world. It is sharply different from atomistic propositional knowledge. Hence, such a view of comprehensive self-knowledge seems to overlap with contemporary views about objectual understanding. This, I think, is an important philosophical convergence between Jaspers and contemporary epistemology. Despite the differences of philosophical context and vocabulary between Jaspers and contemporary epistemology, the emphasis on the final value of understanding by contemporary epistemologists and comprehensive self-knowledge by Jaspers implies that there is more to important epistemic and educational concerns than mere propositional knowledge. By accepting this claim, one has to also include such understanding or comprehensive self-knowledge among the explicit goals of education.

The question, then, is how can our educational institutions in general and universities in particular be made to function toward the achievement of knowledge as well as comprehensive understanding of life in the world? The basic suggestion that can be made in this regard is that at all levels of education a contemporary virtue-theoretic approach with regard

to knowledge and understanding should be added to the theory and practice of teaching and learning. One of the major lessons with respect to the emergence of virtue epistemology on the contemporary scene seems to be a realization that epistemic or intellectual virtues are a very significant part of human flourishing along with moral virtues (VM 158-65). Regardless whether knowledge can successfully be defined in terms of virtuously formed true belief, as Zagzebsky and others have claimed to have done (VM III), the fact remains that neither knowledge nor understanding can be achieved without intellectual conscientiousness, a virtue that Montmarquet considers central to our intellectual lives.<sup>14</sup> A neglect of inculcation of epistemic virtues at school and university levels has resulted in a one-sided emphasis on the utilitarian aspect of education to the detriment of development of a virtuous epistemic character in our professionals and inquirers. This situation is related to what Jaspers takes to be the crisis in contemporary universities. This crisis of fragmentation and disintegration is huge and fundamental and constantly pulls against the goal of a comprehensive understanding of our life in the world. It will have to be addressed by reorienting the university and school education toward the practice of epistemic virtues such as intellectual conscientiousness, intellectual open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual tenacity as well as the exercise of wisdom. In some ways the Platonic and Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics has been extended to epistemology recently. Additionally, it also needs to be applied to the realm of education.

To put the matter in another way, virtue epistemology, when applied to education, would

need to aim at developing the epistemic character of a student. According to virtue epistemologists, generally, an epistemic character involves three elements: epistemic faculties, epistemic abilities, and epistemic or intellectual virtues. Epistemic faculties, such as perception, memory, reason, and so on, are natural but can be sharpened through education and training. Epistemic abilities, for instance, being able to calculate sums, and so on, are acquired and have instrumental value only. Epistemic virtues, such as intellectual conscientiousness, and the like, are valuable for their own sake and play both a reflective and regulative role in one's intellectual flourishing.

Undoubtedly many of the basic epistemic abilities and skills as well as intellectual virtues need to be taught at the school level as such. Such instruction and training is foundational already at that level. However, higher abilities necessary to conduct inquiry in any field of study and to conduct it in an intellectually conscientious manner are to be taught by the university. Therefore, insofar as inquiry is the only way through which knowledge and understanding of nature and society can be generated, the central role of a university is twofold: to produce conscientious inquirers and to produce practitioners who have developed maturity and competence to use the fruits of inquiry responsibly for sustainable socio-economic growth. The former role, however, is more basic for without innovative conscientious inquiry there can be no fruits of inquiry to be put into practice. Hence, I conclude, that a virtue theoretic approach with regard to the goals of education ultimately points to a Jaspers-style humanistic understanding rather than a mere utilitarian or technical understanding of today's role of the university.

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<sup>14</sup> James A. Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1993, p. 21.