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## Credit Theories and the Value of Knowledge

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## CREDIT THEORIES AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

BY JASON BAEHR

*One alleged advantage of credit theories of knowledge is that they are capable of explaining why knowledge is essentially more valuable than true belief. In fact credit theories provide grounds for denying that knowledge is essentially more valuable than mere true belief, and thus that these theories are incapable of overcoming the value problem. Much of the discussion revolves around the question of whether true belief is always epistemically valuable. I consider to what extent, if any, my main argument should worry credit theorists.*

Normative concepts and claims pervade contemporary epistemology.<sup>1</sup> One indication of this is the considerable amount of attention that is presently being paid to the so-called ‘value problem’.<sup>2</sup> The value problem is rooted in a constraint on a philosophical analysis of knowledge: any plausible analysis must entail that knowledge has value over and above the value of mere true belief. This constraint presents a problem: given certain influential ways of thinking about knowledge, it appears that the value of the components of knowledge other than true belief is entirely derivative from the value of true belief itself (so that, according to these accounts, the value of knowledge apparently does not exceed the value of mere true belief).<sup>3</sup>

A second indication of the value-laden character of contemporary epistemology is the popularity of ‘credit theories’ of knowledge. These theories, which have recently been defended by the likes of John Greco, Wayne Riggs, Ernest Sosa and Linda Zagzebski, maintain that knowledge is essentially a matter of forming a true belief in a way that is ‘creditable to’ or explainable

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., W. Riggs, ‘The Value Turn in Epistemology’, in V. Hendricks and D. Pritchard (eds), *New Waves in Epistemology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 300–23.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview and sampling see A. Haddock *et al.* (eds), *Epistemic Value* (Oxford UP, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The obvious example here is crude reliabilism, according to which knowledge is true belief formed via reliable or truth-conducive cognitive processes. The value of a belief’s having been formed in a reliable way is apparently that it is thereby likely to be *true*. Therefore if knowledge is reliably formed true belief, it appears that the value of knowledge is reducible to the value of true belief.

as an exercise of the knower's cognitive abilities, virtues or skills.<sup>4</sup> As Greco has put it ('Knowledge as Credit', p. 111), 'to say that someone knows is to say that his believing the truth can be credited to him. It is to say that the person got things right owing to his own abilities, efforts, and actions, rather than owing to dumb luck, or blind chance, or something else.'

The value problem and credit-theoretical accounts of knowledge have not emerged in isolation. Indeed, one of the advantages of credit theories most widely touted (for example, by Greco and Sosa) is their supposed ability to overcome the value problem. According to credit theorists, while simply having a true belief is a good thing, there is something even better about having a true belief which can be credited to or which is explainable in terms of one's intellectual abilities or virtues. Getting to the truth in this way, rather than, say, by mere luck or chance, is said to be a kind of cognitive *achievement* the value of which exceeds that of mere true belief. If this is right, then knowledge, as conceived in credit-theoretical terms, apparently has value over and above the value of mere true belief, and credit theorists can pry themselves from the jaws of the value problem.

In this paper, I consider whether credit theories really do enjoy the advantage just noted. I argue that they do not. Specifically, I argue that credit theories, when combined with two additional and very plausible claims, actually yield grounds for denying that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, and thus that credit theories are incapable of overcoming the value problem. In the final part of the paper I consider to what extent, if any, this conclusion should prove worrisome to credit theorists.

## I. SKETCH OF THE ARGUMENT

My argument turns on the following three theses:

1. *Credit thesis*: knowledge is essentially a matter of forming a true belief in a way that is creditable to an exercise of one's cognitive abilities.

This, I take it, is the gist of credit theories. (I am thinking of cognitive

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., J. Greco, 'Knowledge as Credit for True Belief', in M. DePaul and L. Zagzebski (eds), *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford UP, 2003), pp. \*—\*, and *Achieving Knowledge: a Virtue-Theoretic Account of Epistemic Normativity* (Cambridge UP, 2010); Riggs, 'Reliability and the Value of Knowledge', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 64 (2002), pp. 79–96, and 'Why Epistemologists Are So Down on Their Luck', *Synthese*, 158 (2007), pp. 329–44; E. Sosa, 'The Place of Truth in Epistemology', in DePaul and Zagzebski (eds), *Intellectual Virtue*, pp. \*—\*, and *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, Vol 1 (Oxford UP, 2007); L. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge UP, 1996), and 'Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth', in DePaul and Zagzebski (eds), *Intellectual Virtue*, pp. \*—\*.

'abilities' broadly, so as to include the full range of intellectual virtues, skills, capacities and the like which credit theorists associate with knowledge.)

2. *Parasitic thesis*: the value of bringing about a particular end in a way that is creditable to an exercise of one's abilities is (*ceteris paribus*) parasitic on the value of the end itself.

According to this thesis, if a given end is positively valuable, then bringing this end about via (or in a way that is creditable to) one's own abilities or skills is also valuable. On the other hand, if the end is worthless, or if it is positively bad or evil, then the fact that one has achieved this end via one's abilities is not a good thing. In the former case, the 'achievement' also will be worthless; in the latter case, it will be downright bad or evil. To illustrate, the terrorist's successful detonation of an explosive in a crowded marketplace is a bad thing because his end is a wicked one; likewise Bernie Madoff's robbery of the life savings of thousands of trusting investors. The fact that the terrorist or Madoff brought about the relevant state of affairs himself, or in a way which can be attributed to his personal skills or abilities, presumably does not entail that doing so is a good or laudable thing.

3. *Deficiency thesis*: some true beliefs (*ceteris paribus*) lack positive value.

I shall say a great deal about this thesis below, but its basic content should be clear enough. The idea is that some true beliefs, considered in their own right, do not enjoy a positive normative status. As I shall show below, this may be because the beliefs in question are *worthless*; or it may be because they are positively *disvaluable*. The important point, for my purposes, is that they are void of any positive normative standing.

It should also be sufficiently clear how the conjunction of these three theses generates the conclusion that knowledge is not always more valuable than mere true belief. As before, if the value of an 'achievement' is a function of the value of the end achieved (parasitic thesis) and some true beliefs lack value (deficiency thesis), then if knowledge is essentially a cognitive achievement (credit thesis), knowledge sometimes lacks value. This amounts to a good ground for thinking that on credit-theoretical accounts of knowledge, knowledge is not always *more* valuable than mere true belief.

## II. PRELIMINARIES

In defending this argument, my primary focus will be the deficiency thesis, that is, the claim that some true beliefs lack positive normative status. Before turning to this thesis, however, a couple of preliminary points are in order.

First, it is important to bear in mind that the deficiency thesis concerns the value of certain beliefs *ceteris paribus* or *as such*. The question is not about any extrinsic or instrumental value that might be instantiated by these beliefs. Rather, it is whether there are any true beliefs which, considered in their own right, are devoid of value. (While I think this qualification is accurate and important, I observe that were it to be denied, the deficiency thesis would become even easier to defend, for surely there are cases in which the costs of gaining a true belief are especially high, so that acquiring it would not, on the whole, be a good thing, epistemically or otherwise.)

Secondly, though I have avoided writing this into the content of the deficiency thesis itself, I shall stipulate that the value in question is distinctively *epistemic*. That is, I shall argue that some true beliefs lack epistemic value, or that they lack value from a distinctively ‘epistemic point of view’. In discussions of the value problem, it is standardly assumed that the value at issue is distinctively epistemic – that it is not, for instance, *moral* or *aesthetic* value. It is difficult to draw a precise distinction between epistemic value and other kinds of value, however. For now, I shall assume that for something to be epistemically valuable is for it to be valuable from the standpoint of a good intellectual life, or from the standpoint of what one might think of as intellectual or cognitive flourishing, with the hope that these notions are sufficiently familiar, intuitive and ‘thick’ for the purposes at hand. In any case, as I show below, if it were to turn out that sense cannot ultimately be made of the distinction between epistemic and other kinds of value, this would make the central claim of this paper even easier to establish.

### III. THE DEFICIENCY THESIS

My concern, then, is with the claim that some true beliefs, considered in their own right, are devoid of any positive epistemic status. What is there to commend such a claim?

Ideally, at this point I would be able to marshal a positive theory of epistemic value, arguing, for instance, that for a belief to be epistemically valuable is for it to satisfy such and such conditions, and that one or more true beliefs clearly fail to satisfy these conditions. But alas, I have no general theory of epistemic value to offer. Nor, to my knowledge, is any such theory extant in the literature, or at any rate, any theory which I think stands a reasonable chance of being correct.<sup>5</sup> So I shall have to settle for more

<sup>5</sup> See Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, pp. 19–20, for a similar assessment. For an attempt at a general theory of epistemic value (albeit one which if taken at face value seems very difficult to accept), see R. Roberts and J. Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: an Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford UP, 2007), pp. 155–64.

intuitive and indirect ways of supporting the deficiency thesis. This is a regrettable limitation, and I do not suppose that any single argument or consideration which I countenance here is entirely conclusive. My contention, however, is that when taken as a whole, the arguments do cast doubt on the claim that true belief is always or in every case epistemically valuable.

#### III.1. *A particularist strategy*

I begin by noting that it is entirely commonplace in epistemology to maintain that some true beliefs lack epistemic value. In discussions of the epistemic good or goal, for instance, one often finds comments to the effect that what is good or desirable from an epistemic standpoint is true belief, but not true belief *simpliciter*, nor true belief about just any old subject-matter. For instance, true beliefs about the number of blades of grass on the neighbour’s front lawn, grains of sand in a cubic foot of the Sahara, or listings in the Hong Kong telephone directory, are not, it is standardly claimed, part of the epistemic goal. Rather, what is good or desirable from an epistemic standpoint is true belief about subject-matters or facts which are epistemically *significant*, *worthy* or *interesting*.<sup>6</sup>

I shall not pause here to try to identify exactly which subject-matters or facts fit this description or why, nor to consider the (perhaps tempting) view that epistemic value should be understood in a purely *subjective* way, so that, say, believing a true proposition (whether about world history or grains of sand) is epistemically valuable (for you) iff you are curious about or interested in the subject-matter to which the proposition pertains. The former project falls well beyond the scope of this paper. I shall, however, return to ‘subjectivism’ about epistemic value towards the end of the paper.

For now, the important point is that if the standard line in epistemology is to be taken at face value – if the intuitive judgements it invokes are correct – then some true beliefs, considered in their own right, lack epistemic value, and the deficiency thesis prevails. In keeping with standard terminology, I shall refer to the beliefs in question as beliefs in *trivial truths*.

##### III.1.1. *Objection: minimal epistemic value?*

A likely objection at this point is that while beliefs in trivial truths are not especially epistemically worthy, presumably they have at least *some*, perhaps

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., A. Plantinga, *Warrant: the Current Debate* (Oxford UP, 1993), pp. 33, 98; M. Steup, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 72–3; A. Goldman, ‘The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues’, in A. Fairweather and L. Zagzebski (eds), *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford UP, 2001), pp. \*—\*, at pp. 38–9; W. Alston, *Beyond ‘Justification’: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Cornell UP, 2005), p. 32; Roberts and Wood, pp. 157–9.

even just a very small amount of, epistemic value. If this is right, then the cases I have countenanced fail to vindicate the deficiency thesis.

Perhaps the first thing to be said in response to this objection is ‘Why think that?’. That is, why think that every acceptance of a trivial truth must have at least some measure of epistemic value? One reply is that true beliefs about trivial subject-matters are still *true*, after all, and since true belief is always epistemically valuable, these beliefs must be epistemically valuable as well. But this reply is blatantly question-begging, for it amounts to an outright denial of the deficiency thesis. The problem, however, is that if the objection cannot be defended in this way, it is far from clear how else it might be supported. There would not, for instance, appear to be much intuitive plausibility in the claim that every acceptance of a trivial truth is positively epistemically valuable. One could insist on something like the mediaeval doctrine of the Transcendentals, according to which there is a fundamental unity of ‘the true’ and ‘the good’ (see, e.g., Zagzebski, ‘Intellectual Motivation’). It is far from clear, however, whether even if this doctrine is true, it would be of any help in the present context (e.g., whether the intrinsic value of true beliefs would be of the required *epistemic* or *intellectual* variety). In any case, a discussion of this contentious metaphysical doctrine and its (supposed) implications falls well beyond the scope of this paper.

In any event, I need not settle this matter here, for there are other true beliefs about which a claim of minimal epistemic value is even less plausible, for instance, the sorts of true beliefs one can acquire by reading the tabloids that line most grocery-store check-out aisles: beliefs about the latest political sex scandals, the comings and goings of Hollywood celebrities, the latest ‘miracle’ weight loss formula, and so on; or the sorts of true beliefs that can be gleaned from daily television newscasts. A representative sample from a recent (actual) broadcast includes stories about the mother of an elementary student being sued for slandering her child’s principal, an unfolding kidnapping, a supposed correlation between having tattoos and using drugs, American children being sold into the sex trade, addicted celebrities, and whether a recent reality show is exploiting its cast members.

An endless supply of true beliefs could be acquired about these and related matters. Yet I take it that it is not very plausible to think that in *every* (perhaps in *any*) such case the belief in question would have positive epistemic worth. Indeed, I suspect that many people would have a rather strong (and *prima facie* reasonable) preference to *avoid* acquiring at least some of these beliefs – a desire to avoid filling one’s mind with the relevant ‘epistemic rubbish’, so to speak – even if doing so were to draw only very negligibly on one’s cognitive capacity and resources. (I am not denying that acquiring such beliefs might, for some at least, involve a certain amount of

*hedonic* value, that is, that one might be ‘entertained’ by watching the relevant broadcasts or the like. But it hardly follows that the relevant beliefs are *epistemically* valuable – that they would, for instance, have a positive bearing on the quality of one’s intellectual life or take one any closer to a state of intellectual or epistemic flourishing.)

The same goes, I should think, for various other categories of true belief, including true beliefs about what might be called, for lack of a better term, ‘fictional rubbish’ (which is distinct from the sort of ‘tabloid rubbish’ just noted, the latter having at least a purported basis in reality). The rows of shelves at your local bookstore are lined with trashy and purely fictional romance novels. These books place at your disposal a seemingly endless supply of true beliefs (of greater and lesser specificity) about the books’ characters, their steamy romances, over-the-top dramatic twists, predictable resolutions, and so on. Again, a sizeable fund of true beliefs is to be gained by reading the latest issue of *Soap Opera Digest* – beliefs about the personalities of the various characters, their ambitions, trials, feuds, affairs, and so on. Here again I take it that one might very reasonably think that at least some (perhaps all) of the true beliefs in question lack even a minimal amount of epistemic value – that their possession would not contribute in any way to the betterment of one’s intellectual life. Indeed, one might reasonably wonder whether such beliefs would actually decrease the overall quality of this life or take one further from a state of intellectual flourishing.

### III.1.2. *Objection: strictly a moral problem?*

At this point a different objection may arise. It might be said that what is unattractive or off-putting about some of the true beliefs just mentioned (in contrast with beliefs about blades of grass or grains of sand, say) is that they have a morally questionable dimension. Thus it might be thought that they fall short of showing that some true beliefs are epistemically worthless.

I am happy to concede that having true beliefs about some of the matters in question might be morally problematic, for instance, beliefs about the details of the latest political sex scandal or the private lives of various Hollywood celebrities. The possession of such beliefs might be intrusive or represent a failure to respect the privacy or autonomy of the persons they are about, and for this reason might be morally problematic.

But this is hardly enough to establish the objection. For the objection to have any force, it must be plausible to think, first, that all such beliefs are morally problematic, and secondly, that while perhaps morally problematic, these beliefs none the less are epistemically valuable.

Neither of these claims is very plausible. For instance, why should there be anything morally problematic about memorizing the contents of the

latest issue of *Soap Opera Digest* or soaking up the details of the latest police chase on the evening news? (Of course, there may be a very broad conception of ‘moral’ according to which this would be problematic, e.g., where the moral domain is thought to be co-extensive with that of human flourishing. But on this account, epistemic value would be a *type* of moral value, for presumably part of what it is to flourish as a human being is to have a good intellectual life. Furthermore, for reasons indicated in §IV.1 below, if one were to embrace a considerably broader conception of the moral, this would, on the whole, make the central claim of this paper considerably easier to establish.) Nor is it clear why true beliefs about the relevant subject-matters should be supposed epistemically worthwhile (even if not morally so). The suggestion under consideration is that, for instance, true beliefs about the morally despicable details of the latest student-teacher sex scandal would be morally problematic but (at least minimally) epistemically good. While I do not deny that they might be morally problematic, I see no reason to think that they would (as such or considered in their own right) be epistemically valuable. Surely such beliefs would not make a positive contribution to the overall quality of their possessors’ intellectual lives or move them any closer to a state of intellectual flourishing.

One additional category of true beliefs may drive this point home, *viz* true beliefs about what might be referred to as *epistemic* rubbish (as opposed to tabloid or fictional rubbish). Here I have in mind true beliefs about various irrational, confused, false, ignorant or dogmatic ways of thinking or believing. Suppose, then, you regard the intellectual life of Smith (your least favourite politician, columnist, religious leader, or philosopher) as rife with epistemic filth. Again there are presumably scores and scores of knowable facts pertaining to Smith’s cognitive operations – facts about what he (mistakenly) believes, his (fallacious) methods of reasoning, his (confused and dogmatic) ways of framing issues, and so on. Would it really be epistemically worthwhile to acquire true beliefs about every last detail of Smith’s intellectual life? Presumably not. Indeed, to make the prospective knowledge even less attractive, suppose Jones’ intellectual life is just as confused, irrational, intellectually vicious, and so on, as Smith’s, and Jones is also an authority on Smith. Here again there are countless knowable facts about Jones’ confused, dogmatic, irrational thinking about Smith’s confused, dogmatic, irrational thinking. Jones has various (confused and mistaken) analyses and interpretations of what Smith means by such and such, of what Smith believes about thus and so, the implications of Smith’s reasoning, and so on. Are true beliefs about these facts always epistemically valuable? This seems entirely dubious. Indeed, a seemingly more accurate description would be that such beliefs are, from an epistemic standpoint, worth trying to resist or avoid.

(A further objection might be that in the above cases, and in any other case, we nevertheless would prefer true belief to false belief. I think this is dubious. With respect to some of the subjects just noted, I might be indifferent about whether my beliefs about them are true or false. In any case, the more important point is that even if the claim at issue were correct, the most it would show is that *where one must form a belief*, true belief always has some value. The claim has no bearing at all on cases in which the choice is one between, say, true belief and no belief at all. Indeed, the above cases are precisely ones in which no belief at all might intuitively be preferable to either true or false belief.<sup>7</sup>)

### III.1.3. *Objection: epistemic opportunity costs*

One additional objection needs to be considered at this point. It might be wondered, with respect to at least some of the true beliefs noted above, whether the apparent problem is strictly a *practical* or *consequentialist* one. That is, it might be claimed that while from an epistemic standpoint it generally is not worth having the relevant beliefs, this is only because their acquisition necessarily involves forfeiting cognitive space and resources that would be better spent on more worthy cognitive fare. Considered in their own right, apart from their epistemic opportunity costs, the idea would be, these beliefs are in fact epistemically valuable. If this were right, it would be a mistake to think, as the deficiency thesis states, that, *ceteris paribus*, some true beliefs lack epistemic value.

I submit that I have already offered reasons for thinking, with respect to at least some of the beliefs in question, that this is a very implausible diagnosis. For instance, bracketing a concern with any attending epistemic opportunity costs, and thinking strictly in terms of the overall quality of your intellectual life, would you really want to have scores of true beliefs about the cognitive activity of the sorts of ignorant, dogmatic or irrational persons noted above? Or about the details of celebrity *X*’s sales pitch for a new skin cream or diet pill? Or about the latest dramatic developments on *Days of Our Lives*? I take it that with respect to at least some of these beliefs the answer is ‘no’. Again, while in any particular case a consideration of the potential epistemic costs may be relevant, it is implausible to think that the only (justifiable and epistemically relevant) reason one might have for choosing not to acquire such beliefs is that the epistemic costs would be too great – that given sufficient time, space, resources, etc., these beliefs would in fact be worth having from an epistemic standpoint.

One additional reply is in order. Suppose, contrary to what has just been suggested, that our sense of the epistemic worthlessness (even disvalue) of the

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Dennis Whitcomb for raising this issue.

beliefs in question is strictly a function of our (implicit) concern with the corresponding opportunity costs. It does not obviously follow that this judgement is something other than a *ceteris paribus* one (i.e., that it is strictly an ‘all-things-considered’ judgement). This is because the costs in question are a direct function of certain deep features of our cognitive nature. If the thrust of the objection is correct, we regard belief in trivial truths as epistemically worthless because we are limited in our cognitive capacity and resources, that is, because we cannot know everything. But why regard this as an all-things-considered (as opposed to a *ceteris paribus*) judgement? That is, why think that for the judgement in question to be true from a *ceteris paribus* standpoint it must abstract away from the relevant essential features of our cognitive nature? Assuming that it need not do so, the objection at issue does not even begin to pose a problem for the deficiency thesis.

### III.2. *Less is more*

A second, briefer, and more principled consideration in support of the deficiency thesis consists in a certain plausible *explanation* of some of the intuitive judgements just considered. Suppose *A* and *B* have in common a very large and impressive stock of true beliefs – beliefs about a wide range of subject-matters that virtually everyone would regard as epistemically important, worthy or interesting. *A* has these beliefs and only these beliefs, but *B* has these beliefs plus a substantial (albeit limited) quantity of true beliefs the status of which would be widely regarded as epistemically questionable (e.g., beliefs about soap opera trivia, celebrity likes and dislikes, the political machinations of Rush Limbaugh, etc.). Who is epistemically better off, *A* or *B*? Alternatively, when considered in their own right, whose intellectual life or noetic structure would you prefer to have? While *B* has more true beliefs than *A*, I take it that most people would prefer to have or would regard as epistemically superior or more desirable the noetic structure of *A* rather than *B*; moreover, I take it that this preference would not be an unreasonable one. Indeed, it does not seem implausible to think that the additional beliefs possessed by *B* actually *lower* the overall quality of – that they do something to undermine or contaminate – *B*’s otherwise enviable noetic structure.

One explanation of this, and of several of the intuitive judgements identified in the previous section, is that in the cognitive domain, as in many other normative domains, quality sometimes trumps quantity – that *less is sometimes more*. Thinking of epistemic value in this way again provides an explanation of a considerable range of intuitive data. Moreover, I take it that this explanation is *prima facie* plausible, that is, that it seems a reasonable or independently promising explanation of the relevant judgements. If so, the principle adds to the case for thinking that not every true belief is epistemically

valuable. For again it indicates that the addition of true beliefs to one’s existing set of beliefs, while necessarily increasing the size of this set, does not necessarily involve the introduction of any additional epistemic value.

### III.3. *Underlying models of epistemic value*

A third consideration in favour of the deficiency thesis begins with the observation that epistemic value admits of *degrees*. One need not embrace the deficiency thesis in order to accept this claim. Indeed, those who object to the deficiency thesis by insisting that the sorts of true beliefs considered above, while perhaps less epistemically valuable than many other true beliefs, nevertheless have at least a *minimal* amount of epistemic value, are committed to just such a view. To put this another way, the claim is that some things are in themselves more worth knowing or having true beliefs about than others. (This is likely to strike ‘subjectivists’ about epistemic value as implausible. However, as noted earlier, I explain below why if subjectivism about epistemic value is true, this makes the burden of this paper that much easier to discharge.) Accordingly, suppose (arbitrarily) that true beliefs about some things or subject-matters have a value of +5, true beliefs about other less important subject-matters have a value of +3, that true beliefs about minimally important subject-matters have a value of +1, and so on.

I have been arguing that epistemic value not only admits of degrees but also that in certain cases it reaches a *vanishing point* – that the epistemic value of some true beliefs reduces to zero (and perhaps even dips into negative territory). This view is at least *prima facie* plausible, especially when considered in the light of the discussion in the previous two sections. Nevertheless it is worth considering what deeper model of epistemic value might lie behind it.

One fairly obvious candidate is a model according to which truth *considered strictly by itself* makes neither a positive nor a negative contribution to a belief’s normative status, that is, according to which truth *simpliciter* is evaluatively neutral. Instead, according to the model, epistemic value supervenes on the *combination* of truth and what I have been describing as epistemically ‘worthy’ or ‘significant’ propositional content. (More precisely, it supervenes on a belief or doxastic acceptance of such content.) Thus a belief’s being epistemically valuable is a matter of its being both true and about an at least minimally significant subject-matter. To put this slightly differently, what is good or desirable from an epistemic standpoint is true belief *about certain subject-matters but not others*. I shall refer to this as the ‘conjunctive’ model of epistemic value, for if it is correct, the normative status of a belief is a function of the combination or conjunction of its truth-value and its subject-matter. (Neither this model, nor the one considered

below, is intended to be complete. For presumably there are other less immediately relevant sources of epistemic value as well, including certainty, understanding, and rationality. My concern here is limited to the value of truth or true belief.)

The conjunctive model also provides a plausible explanation of the various intuitive data considered in previous sections. Nevertheless, it is worth considering what an alternative model of epistemic value might look like. Specifically, what sort of model might underlie the objection, noted above, that while some true beliefs, on account of their subject-matter, are epistemically more valuable than others, all true beliefs have at least a minimal amount of epistemic value?

The most obvious candidate is a view according to which (1) every true belief acquires a kind of baseline value (+1, say) strictly on account of its being true – i.e., without any regard whatsoever for what the belief is about; (2) this value then is enhanced or augmented in so far as the belief is also about an epistemically significant subject-matter. Thus true beliefs to which the conjunctive model assigns a value of zero (e.g., those about epistemically insignificant or unworthy subject-matters) would be assigned a value of +1 on the present model; while beliefs to which the conjunctive model assigns a value of, say, +3 would enjoy a value of +4; and so on. I shall call this second model the ‘disjunctive’ model of epistemic value, for it portrays epistemic value as deriving from truth *simpliciter* or from significant propositional content.

I do not have a knockdown argument against the disjunctive model. But I do find it at least somewhat puzzling and counter-intuitive. It will be helpful to look more closely at the sense in which the model portrays propositional content as a source of epistemic value. On one interpretation, significant propositional content is a completely autonomous source of epistemic value: a belief’s having such content is sufficient for its having at least certain amount of epistemic value. This is not a very plausible view, however, for it implies that a false belief with worthy propositional content would be at least minimally epistemically valuable. Again, the mere fact that the belief is about a significant subject-matter would be sufficient for its having at least a minimal degree of epistemic value. I take it that this is not a very attractive implication. The view would also entail that having a false belief about an epistemically significant subject-matter is epistemically superior to having a false belief about some trivial matter. But here again ‘getting it wrong’ with respect to a significant subject-matter seems to be epistemically *worse* than getting it wrong with respect to a trivial one.

Thus a defender of the disjunctive model would do better, it seems, to maintain that significant propositional content is a *conditional* source of

epistemic value. Specifically, it might be held that a belief about an epistemically significant subject-matter is epistemically valuable only if the belief is also true. This would allow the defender of the disjunctive model to avoid the view that false beliefs about epistemically significant subject-matters are at least minimally epistemically valuable. Thus on the present interpretation, epistemic value would be a function of either (1) true belief *simpliciter*, or (2) true belief about epistemically significant subject-matters.

On this way of understanding the disjunctive model, it simply adds a source of value to the source already posited by the conjunctive model. Instead of maintaining, as the latter model does, that epistemic value supervenes strictly on the conjunction of true belief and significant propositional content, the disjunctive model stipulates that true belief *simpliciter*, or true belief considered in isolation from propositional content, is an additional autonomous source of epistemic value.

But now a further problem with the disjunctive model becomes apparent. I remarked above that from an intuitive standpoint there is little reason to think that every true belief is epistemically valuable. Again, there appear to be true beliefs the possession of which does not make even a very small contribution to the quality of one’s intellectual life, or take one even a short step closer to a state of intellectual flourishing (indeed, some true beliefs seem to take us *further* from an ideal intellectual life). Neither do there appear to be any (non-question-begging) *principled* considerations in support of the claim that true belief is always epistemically valuable. If this is accurate, it looks as though the disjunctive model’s assertion that true belief *simpliciter* is an autonomous source of epistemic value has nothing to support it.

Indeed, a defender of the competing conjunctive model of epistemic value appears well positioned at this point to offer an error theory of the disjunctive model.<sup>8</sup> The error-theorist might plausibly speculate that while the disjunctive model maintains correctly that true belief about significant subject-matters is an autonomous source of epistemic value, it makes the mistake of asserting that true belief *simpliciter*, or true belief considered apart from propositional content, is also an autonomous source of epistemic value. Put another way, the charge would be that the disjunctive model takes a particular thing *x* (*viz* truth) which *when united with another thing y* (*viz* significant propositional content) clearly is valuable, and merely assumes that *x* retains its value independently even when divorced from *y*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Dan Speak for suggesting this way of framing the present point and for helpful discussion on this and related points.

<sup>9</sup> This is the mirror image of the mistaken view considered above, according to which a belief about an epistemically significant subject-matter is valuable even if the belief is false. It is also at least a close relative of the so-called ‘additive fallacy’ in moral philosophy, as discussed in S. Kagan, ‘The Additive Fallacy’, *Ethics*, ★★ (1998), pp. 5–31.



In this section, I have examined two models of epistemic value: one that can be extrapolated from the intuitive and principled considerations discussed in previous sections and another that appears to lie behind a certain objection to these considerations. While the former model is plausible, the latter model is problematic. This, then, reinforces the case for the deficiency thesis, for if the conjunctive model of epistemic value is correct, it follows that true belief is not *always* epistemically valuable.

#### IV. FURTHER OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

As indicated earlier, my claim is that when taken together, the considerations put forth in the previous three sections cast significant doubt on the view that true belief, considered in its own right, is *always* epistemically valuable. While, to be sure, true belief is *generally* epistemically valuable, or epistemically valuable in most (familiar) cases, it appears that this is an accurate generalization and nothing more. At a minimum, I hope the discussion up to this point establishes that those who wish to deny the deficiency thesis must argue for this denial, and, in the process of doing so, grapple with various intuitive and theoretical grounds to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>

In the present section, I turn to address four remaining objections. The first three primarily concern the deficiency thesis and can be dealt with relatively quickly. The final objection concerns the parasitic thesis and requires more careful attention.

##### IV.1. *Distinctively 'epistemic' value?*

Up to this point, I have been assuming that it makes good sense to speak of such things as distinctively *epistemic* value or a distinctively *epistemic* point of view. I readily acknowledge, however, that the line between epistemic value or the epistemic point of view and other kinds of value or other points of view can at times appear rather blurry and perhaps even indeterminate. This might, with some plausibility, lead one to wonder whether the relevant distinction can survive critical reflection. This in turn might seem to pose a problem for my argument.

I have some sympathy with this worry. Indeed, this explains why I did not make explicit mention of 'epistemic' value in my initial formulation of

<sup>10</sup> A good illustration here is the otherwise excellent M. Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (MIT Press, 2004). Lynch apparently thinks that while not all true beliefs are equally epistemically valuable, all have at least a minimal amount of such value. In his articulation of this view, he begins with the plausible claim (pp. 15–19) that true belief in general is epistemically valuable. But he goes on to claim (pp. 47–55) that true belief is epistemically valuable in every case (including cases of true belief about trivial matters). However, it is difficult to identify any positive arguments in his discussion for this considerably stronger claim.

the deficiency thesis (instead I put the point simply in terms of value *simpliciter*). Fortunately, however, I need not get to the bottom of this issue to assess its bearing on my argument. For if it does not make sense to draw a fundamental distinction between epistemic and moral or other kinds of value, the deficiency thesis turns out to be that much easier to establish.

One central reason for hypothesizing a distinctively epistemic kind of value arose in the context of an objection to the deficiency thesis (§III.1.2). In the face of some of the cases countenanced in support of this thesis, an objector might assert that the beliefs in question are only *morally* problematic – that they are not in fact epistemically problematic or problematic from an epistemic standpoint. The upshot is that if such a distinction cannot ultimately withstand critical scrutiny, this makes it even more plausible to think that some true beliefs lack the relevant normative status. Therefore the problem with limiting the focus to the epistemic value of true beliefs, if in fact there is a problem, is a liability for the person who rejects the deficiency thesis, not for one who accepts it.

##### IV.2. *Subjectivism about epistemic value*

I have also been making liberal use of terms like epistemically 'worthy', 'important', 'significant', and the like, and have been suggesting that these terms pick out objective normative properties. I also have some sympathy, however, with the worry that epistemic value is actually a *subjective* affair, for instance, that *S*'s having a true belief about *x* is epistemically valuable (for *S*) iff *S* is interested in or curious about *x*.<sup>11</sup> While I do not accept this as a complete account of epistemic value, I can appreciate its attraction. (A more plausible position, in my view, is one according to which a person's epistemic interests or 'curiosities' are *one* source of epistemic value, albeit a source that is constrained by other [more objective] sources.)

But here again, for the purposes of the present argument, I need not get to the bottom of the matter. For if subjectivism about epistemic value is correct, it also serves to bolster, rather than to threaten, my argument. One need only reflect on the fact that whoever *S* is, there is likely to be a vast range of things about which *S* has no interest or curiosity whatsoever. If so, then true belief about such things will be epistemically worthless for *S*. On the plausible assumption that some subject-matters or propositions are such that *no one* is interested in them, true belief about these things will lack epistemic value, full stop. Either way, it is false that true belief is always epistemically valuable, and the deficiency thesis is vindicated. The spectre of subjectivism, then, does not pose a significant threat to my argument.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Grimm, 'Epistemic Normativity', in Haddock *et al.* (eds), *Epistemic Value*, pp. \*\*–\*\*, for a discussion of this view.

#### IV.3. *Omniscience as an epistemic ideal*

A third objection concerns some fairly ordinary ways of thinking about omniscience. Omniscience is often regarded as a kind of epistemic ideal. The concept of God, for instance, is of a perfect being; omniscience, that is, knowing everything there is to know and thus to accepting or believing every true proposition, is one of God's great-making qualities. If, then, omniscience is an epistemic ideal, must not the deficiency thesis be false? That is, should it not be denied that some true beliefs are void of epistemic value?

A comprehensive response to this objection would take me beyond the limits of this paper. Nevertheless I shall sketch a few possible replies. First, I think the discussion earlier in the paper should give us serious pause about treating omniscience as an epistemic ideal. For to be omniscient would be to possess a vast number of beliefs about the various (ostensibly) mundane, insignificant, uninteresting and otherwise epistemically unappealing states of affairs noted above. Intuitively, such beliefs are not worth having, even from an epistemic standpoint. A much more plausible ideal, and one that fits well with the main argument of this paper, would be something like exhaustive knowledge of all and only epistemically significant or worthy subject-matters.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, there are ways of thinking about what it is for something to be an ideal from which it clearly does not follow that if omniscience is an epistemic ideal, true belief is always epistemically valuable. For instance, ideals may strictly be concepts or standards which we would do well to allow to guide our actions, decisions, the way we organize our lives, and so on. While I think there are good reasons not to treat omniscience as an ideal even in this sense, it is not difficult to see why even if we did, it would not automatically follow that true belief is always an epistemic good. It would leave open the possibility, for instance, that while we are perhaps epistemically best off acting *as if* true belief is always epistemically valuable, the reality is that it is not. Adopting such a policy might, say, be the most effective way of maximizing the overall quality of our noetic structures

<sup>12</sup> Does this mean that God or a perfect being cannot be both omniscient and wholly good? I do not think so. First, God might have non-epistemic reasons for being omniscient – for instance, it might be essential to God's moral purposes in the world (the details of a celebrity's life might matter to God in a way which does not and should not matter to the rest of us). Secondly, the normative epistemic standards applicable to God may not be identical to those applicable to non-divine beings. Specifically, what counts as an ideal intellectual life for a divine being may be different from what counts as an ideal intellectual life for a human being. Indeed, within a Jewish–Christian theological framework, the human desire for omniscience is more likely to be regarded as an indication of *hubris* than it is of any virtue.

(attempting to be appropriately *selective* in our cognitive intake might lead to a cognitive situation of a lesser quality).

A third limitation of the objection can be illustrated in connection with *A* and *B* in the example above: they share a large and enviable stock of true beliefs about a range of epistemically important and interesting subject-matters, but *B* also has several true beliefs about one or more epistemically unappealing or seemingly insignificant subject-matters. It seemed that *A* has the more desirable intellectual life or is better off from a broadly epistemic standpoint. A critic, however, might envisage a third person *C* who not only believes all the true propositions believed by *A* and *B*, but also every other true proposition in addition. *C*, then, would be omniscient. Would not *C*'s epistemic or intellectual situation, the critic might ask, surpass that of *A*? If so, does this not pose a problem for the deficiency thesis?

While I can understand at least an initial temptation to think of *C* as instantiating an epistemic good that is not instantiated by either *A* or *B*, it is not at all clear that *C*'s situation would be superior to *A*'s (or perhaps even to *B*'s). Given the intuitively questionable value of the overwhelming amount of additional 'inventory' in *C*'s noetic structure (and surely the volume here would be staggering!), it is far from clear whether, taken as a whole, *C*'s intellectual life or cognitive situation would be superior to that of *A* (or *B*).

The more important point, however, is that here again I need not settle the matter in order to vindicate the deficiency thesis. For even if omniscience were a genuine ideal, that is, even if *C* occupied the superior epistemic position, there is still the fact that *A*'s position is superior to *B*'s.

This suggests something like the following principle: *S*'s having what would appear to be (but perhaps are not) epistemically worthless true beliefs is epistemically valuable if, but only if, *S* has *every* true belief or believes *every* true proposition, that is, if, but only if, *S* is omniscient. This principle leaves wide open the possibility that in a vast range of cases (like that of *B*) various true beliefs lack any epistemic value. The underlying idea would again be that the beliefs in question *can* be epistemically valuable, but only if they contribute to their possessor's omniscience.

#### IV.4. *'Performative' value*

My primary concern thus far has been the deficiency thesis. But a fourth and final objection takes issue with the *parasitic* thesis, that is, with the claim that the value of achieving a particular end via one's own abilities is parasitic on the value of the end in question. This claim might be challenged in the following way.

Suppose we accept the idea that some true beliefs, considered in their own right, lack any epistemic value. It might still be argued that when

people reach the truth about an epistemically worthless subject-matter via an exercise of their own cognitive abilities or virtues, this exercise itself has a kind of value that is separate from and independent of the value of the true belief it yields. There is, it might be thought, a kind of *intrinsic* value in the very operation of the relevant abilities – in, say, a competent or virtuous *attempt* to get to the truth. On this account, knowledge essentially is or involves a kind of cognitive ‘performance’, a performance the value of which is intrinsic and independent of the value of the resulting true belief. I shall call this value ‘performative’ value.<sup>13</sup>

I can understand the temptation to hold something like this view provided that the relevant cognitive abilities are conceived in a certain normatively robust way. Suppose, knowledge is as Linda Zagzebski portrays it in *Virtues of the Mind*: to know that *p* is to form a true belief that *p* in a way attributable to one’s ‘virtuous intellectual motives’, which are motives that derive ultimately from something like a love of truth. Zagzebski thinks, and I would agree, that love of truth, and the motives derivative thereof, have a kind of *intrinsic* value – that, at any rate, the value of these motives is not merely a function of their *causal* or *instrumental* relation to the goal of truth. This is similar to the Kantian idea that the value of a good will is not (or not merely) a function of its propensity to bring about good states of affairs. In any case, if it is right to think that the relevant cognitive abilities involve Zagzebski-type motives, and if an exercise of these abilities is an essential feature of knowledge, then it appears to follow that knowledge essentially has a kind of distinctive value *vis à vis* mere true belief.

There are, however, at least two major problems with this move. The first is its implications in connection with a case in which the true belief at issue is epistemically worthless (e.g., a belief about the latest dramatic twist on *Days of Our Lives*). That there are such beliefs is not a question-begging assumption given that my present concern is the parasitic thesis rather than the deficiency thesis. Suppose I desire to reach the truth about the matter in question, and, as a result of this and related desires and actions, manage to succeed at doing so. The suggestion would be that while the true belief I come to acquire is epistemically worthless, the intellectual motives I exhibit in the process of doing so are epistemically valuable. But here lies a rather obvious problem, namely, that if the true belief in question is not

<sup>13</sup> This move is inspired by Sosa’s discussion in *A Virtue Epistemology*, pp. 78–9; however, it is not clear that Sosa would endorse it, for he apparently thinks of the added value of knowledge in *extrinsic* terms. The move is also similar to one made by some moral philosophers who claim that various character traits employed in the service of morally bad ends can still be considered valuable or virtuous on account of their involving a kind of admirable self-control or self-mastery: see, e.g., R. Roberts, ‘Will Power and the Virtues’, *Philosophical Review*, 93 (1984), pp. 227–47.

epistemically valuable, then neither would a desire for such a belief appear to be epistemically valuable (indeed, it might be epistemically defective). In short, while a love of *important* or *worthy* epistemic ends might have a kind of intrinsic or at least non-instrumental value, a love of worthless epistemic ends does not. Therefore in cases of the sort I have been concerned with, it is implausible to think that there exists some additional truth-independent value that might present a significant problem for the parasitic thesis – even if we think of knowledge in a robustly volitional or motivational way.

A second problem is that the account of knowledge at issue, again one according to which knowledge requires something like intellectually virtuous character or motives, faces formidable obstacles on other fronts, so that even if it were capable of ‘solving’ the value problem, it would be untenable on other grounds. While I cannot develop the relevant criticisms here,<sup>14</sup> the most straightforward one is that there is very good reason to think that knowledge does not always require the possession of virtuous motives. Basic sensory and introspective knowledge (e.g., that I have hands or that I have a headache) rarely if ever requires the possession of any virtuous or truth-orientated intellectual motives. Thus a volitional or character-based account of knowledge is much too demanding. If this is right, then whatever advantage a volitional or character-based account of knowledge might enjoy *vis à vis* the value problem would be swamped by an even more serious disadvantage.

Now for a final problem with the idea that knowledge essentially involves a kind of ‘performative’ value independent of the normative status of the known belief. While a credit-theorist might limit the relevant knowledge-making abilities to intellectual character traits or related states, the reality is that most credit theorists do not. Credit theorists like Ernest Sosa and John Greco, for instance, think of these abilities primarily in terms of certain cognitive *faculties* like memory, introspection, vision, hearing, and the like. One advantage of doing so is that their views stop short of requiring that knowers possess virtuous motives or related psychological states, which allows them to get around the sort of objection just noted.

But views like those of Sosa and Greco face a different problem in the present context, namely, that it is not plausible to think of the operation of the relevant cognitive faculties as *intrinsically* epistemically valuable. Unlike, perhaps, the value of a conscientiously or volitionally robust effort to reach the truth, the value of the mundane and rather mechanistic operation of vision or memory seems clearly to be strictly instrumental in nature. What makes the operation of the latter abilities epistemically good is their

<sup>14</sup> See J. Baehr, ‘Character in Epistemology’, *Philosophical Studies*, 128 (2006), pp. 479–514, for a development of these and related objections.

propensity to lead to true belief. (This is in fact among the standard assumptions, noted at the outset of the paper, which leave reliabilists in an especially precarious position *vis à vis* the value problem.) If so, it is a mistake to think of reaching the truth on account of an exercise of these abilities as involving ‘performative value’ that is independent of the value of true belief.

(Duncan Pritchard has suggested that an epistemically worthless belief might accrue a kind of ‘final’ value that is neither instrumental nor intrinsic on account of its being an ‘achievement’ of the believer in question, where this is a matter of its having been arrived at on account of the believer *S*’s cognitive abilities or virtues, including *S*’s non-volitional virtues.<sup>15</sup> I do not find this suggestion any more plausible than the suggestion discussed above that desiring to reach the truth about an epistemically ‘worthless’ or ‘insignificant’ subject-matter would be intrinsically valuable. That is, while it may be that *S*’s acquiring the relevant epistemically worthless belief is an ‘achievement’ of sorts – *S* does, after all, acquire the belief], I see no reason to think of this achievement as a *valuable* thing. Put another way, my suggestion is that the ‘parasitic thesis’ is equally applicable to ‘achievements’ such that *S*’s achieving an end *e* is valuable only if *e* itself is valuable. This general idea is especially clear in connection with cases in which the end in question is downright disvaluable or wicked. *S*’s perpetrating a heinous crime capably and skillfully, for instance, while perhaps an ‘achievement’ in some sense, surely need not be a good thing, even *qua* achievement. Indeed, one might think that considered as *something that S* executed, *S*’s ‘achievement’ is actually worse than it would have been had the relevant state of affairs been brought about in some alternative way, e.g., by accident.)

In sum, while the exercise of certain intellectual abilities may have a kind of independent ‘performative’ value *vis à vis* mere true belief, an account of knowledge which requires such an exercise is implausible on other grounds. If, however, we broaden our conception of the relevant abilities so as to avoid this problem, the sought after value disappears. Either way, little doubt is cast on the parasitic thesis.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that the value of forming a true belief via one’s cognitive abilities is parasitic on the value of the belief itself, and that some true beliefs lack epistemic value; accordingly, if knowledge is conceived as reaching the

<sup>15</sup> See D. Pritchard, ‘Apt Performance and Epistemic Value’, *Philosophical Studies*, 143 (2009), pp. 407–16. A similar view is suggested at various points in Sosa (*A Virtue Epistemology*, chs 4–5).

truth on account of one’s cognitive abilities, it follows that some items of knowledge also lack epistemic value, and thus that knowledge is not in every instance epistemically superior to or more valuable than mere true belief. If this is right, then contrary to the prevailing wisdom, credit theories of knowledge are incapable of overcoming the value problem.

(Could it be that while some instances of knowledge lack positive epistemic value, they are still ‘more valuable’ than the corresponding items of mere true belief in the sense that they are less disvaluable? I shall not stop to pursue this possibility here, expect to say that even if the claim in question were true, it would not help the credit theorist with the value problem. For solving the value problem requires answering to or making sense of the content of a widely shared pre-theoretical intuition to the effect that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. It is extremely implausible, however, to think of the intuitive added value of knowledge in the very weak and negative terms just suggested. Therefore even if knowledge were always ‘less bad’ than mere true belief, this would yield no solution to the value problem as it is standardly understood.)

The final question I shall briefly address concerns the extent to which this conclusion should be worrisome to credit theorists. Obviously, if the value problem is a legitimate problem, that is, if it really is incumbent on an analysis of knowledge to entail that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief, then it seems that credit theorists should be worried indeed. My own view, however, is that the value problem is not a genuine problem. I have two main grounds for this: first, as I have argued elsewhere, the intuition which is thought to create the problem lacks the scope and content it would need to do so;<sup>16</sup> secondly, partly for reasons suggested in the discussion above, I would argue that knowledge is not always more valuable than mere true belief. I cannot rehearse these arguments here. But if they are successful, then credit theorists need not worry that their view fails to entail that knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief.

In fact, in the light of the full range of considerations put forth here, the credit theorist can claim a special theoretical advantage in any attempt to make proper sense of epistemic value. Given some of the examples and other considerations adduced above, it seems a highly plausible assumption that the deficiency thesis holds not just for true belief but also for knowledge, that is, that some knowledge is not epistemically valuable, or that in certain cases an item of knowledge lacks such value – ‘junk knowledge’. Assuming there is some junk knowledge, credit theorists can claim to have at least a partial explanation of its normative status. Specifically, they can

<sup>16</sup> J. Baehr, ‘Is There a Value Problem?’, in Haddock *et al.* (eds), *Epistemic Value*, pp. 42–59.

maintain that if we think of knowledge in credit-theoretical terms, and if we accept the further plausible claims that some true beliefs lack epistemic value (deficiency thesis) and that the value of achieving an end in a credit-relevant way (i.e. via one's own abilities) is parasitic on the value of the end itself (parasitic thesis), we are in an especially good position to explain why junk knowledge has the normative status it does. In this respect, far from having reason to worry about the implications of the foregoing argument, my own view is that credit theorists have special reason to embrace it.<sup>17</sup>

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