

## **Pointless Truth**

My primary interest is in the value of knowledge and understanding, and the view I wish to defend is that these values are unrestricted. I believe there is a difference between the values in question, but will not pursue that issue here, since I have pursued it elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I'll pursue a strong objection to the unrestricted value that I claim knowledge and understanding have in common. The objection arises because of the factive nature of knowledge and understanding, which leads to a dependence of the value in question on the value of truth itself. If truth doesn't have unrestricted value, then knowledge and understanding don't either, and the objection claims that truth doesn't have such value. I will begin by describing the kind of value I take knowledge and understanding to share in order to unearth the difficulty for this position, a difficulty arising from the problem of pointless truth. I will then argue that the problem does not undermine the fully general and unrestricted value of knowledge and understanding.

### **I. The Unqualified Value of Knowledge and Understanding**

A beginning point in thinking about the value of knowledge and understanding is that such value is universal and unqualified, but counterexamples abound. We are told that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, we know that there are things we are better off not knowing, and we realize that Socrates was right in pointing out to Meno that a guide who knows the way to Larissa is no better, as a guide, than one who merely has a true opinion about it. In these ways, and many others, the view that these values are universal and unqualified is threatened.

These facts have led a number of philosophers to give qualified endorsement only to the value of knowledge. Williamson says that knowledge is valuable when the cognitive faculties are in good order,<sup>2</sup> Swinburne qualifies the value as obtaining “almost always,”<sup>3</sup> and Percival in a similar vein says “by and large.”<sup>4</sup> Ward Jones expresses a similar idea when he writes,

“I value going to fairs because I have fun when I go to them, even though I can distinctly remember occasions when I got sick on the rides and did not have any fun at all. The fact of my having fun at fairs is responsible for the value I place on fairs, but my having fun is only a contingent property of my attending them. Knowledge is like fairs. We value them both even though we do not always get what we want from them.”<sup>5</sup>

Each in their own way qualify the claim that knowledge is always and everywhere and of necessity valuable, and though they do not address the question of the value of understanding, there is no reason to suppose their appraisal would change if they were remarking about it instead.

Moreover, what they say clearly has a ring of truth to it, given even a cursory acquaintance with the initial points made above. A little knowledge can be a bad thing; there are some things we are better off not knowing; and knowledge is typically no better than true opinion in satisfying our practical interests. Even so, nothing in the above undermines the claim that knowledge and understanding have universal and unqualified value. When it is pointed out that true opinion gets us all the practical benefits that knowledge does, a quite natural response is to insist that practical value isn't the kind of value one has in mind when one claims that knowledge is more valuable than true belief. Upon being shown the disastrous consequences of learning what it takes to construct nuclear weapons, a defender of the value of knowledge will want to

distinguish the initial value of knowledge from the overall value that results when knowledge is put to use.

We thus notice that two distinctions are needed to understand and appreciate the plausibility of the claim that knowledge and understanding have universal and unqualified value. The first distinction is between all-things-considered value and prima facie value. Suppose an epistemic terrorist, opposed to the proliferation of knowledge, threatens to kill you if you happen to know a specific claim. Such knowledge would be immensely disvaluable for you, but one ought not confuse this all-things-considered disvalue with the limited and positive prima facie value that knowledge possesses in itself, apart from such farfetched consequences. This prima facie value does not disappear in the presence of untoward consequences, but rather is defeated by these other factors. When the story is told about the all-things-considered disvalue of knowing that specific claim, the story includes the prima facie value of knowledge and the fact that it is overridden by the negative practical consequences engendered by such knowledge.

This distinction helps us to understand the quote above from Jones comparing knowledge and fairs. At the level of all-things-considered value, there is an analogy: fairs are sometimes not fun, and knowledge sometimes causes harm. But fairs have nothing intrinsic going for them. There is no special kind of value that resides in fairs, considered in themselves. They have no prima facie value in themselves that must be overridden or defeated for the experience of going to fairs to have neutral or negative value. The value of fairs is nothing over and above the question of whether fairs are typically associated with having fun. But the value of knowledge is not like this, at least not when the associated value is all-things-considered value. Pieces of knowledge can be all-things-considered disvaluable, just as fairs could typically be no fun at all,

but the former possibility can only arise by having the intrinsic value of knowledge and understanding overridden or defeated by competing values. No such remarks about the value of fairs would be correct.

This point leads to a second distinction, one aimed at clarifying the nature of the value in question that knowledge and understanding possess. We first distinguish among different types of value: practical, social, moral, political, religious, and aesthetic. We can then use such a list to clarify the notion of all-things-considered value (it is some sort of function on all the kinds of value in question), and point out the need for an additional kind of value as well. In addition to practical concerns, there are purely theoretical ones displayed in the ubiquitous phenomenon of curiosity. Such a purely theoretical value is different from any of the values listed to this point, and it is this kind of value involved in the claim that knowledge and understanding have universal and unqualified value.

Given these distinctions, the value claim in question is very much akin to the claim that causes raise the likelihood of their effects. This latter claim about causes is subject to counterexample. Taking birth control pills causes thrombosis, but the statistical probability of a getting thrombosis is lower for those who take the pill than for those who do not. The crucial factor at work here is interaction of causal factors: pregnancy also causes thrombosis, and taking the pill reduces the probability of pregnancy. The lesson here is not that it is a mistake to think of causes as probability enhancers, but that the truth of the claim that causes are probability enhancers can only be seen by controlling for other causal factors. Just so with the value of knowledge and understanding: to find this value, we have to control for the presence of competing values that may generate an overall disvalue for any given state of knowledge or

understanding. Just as we don't want a theory of causality that rests content with the claim that causes sometimes raise the probability of their effects and sometimes don't, we shouldn't be satisfied with a theory of knowledge or understanding that addresses the value question only by a similar "sometimes yes, sometimes no" approach. Once we move beyond such remarks by putting the right controls in place, we can see both how causation is related to probability and the universal and unqualified value of knowledge and understanding.

We can put the view in question in terms of the language of defeasible reasoning. Finding out that a given cognitive state is a state of knowledge or understanding is a defeasible reason for thinking that the state is all-things-considered valuable. Finding out that a given cognitive state is a state that came into existence on a Tuesday in the middle of July is not such a reason. In both cases, the overall value of the state can vary from quite valuable to quite disvaluable, but we miss the central axiological feature when we attend only to the overall results in question. By distinguishing purely theoretical value from other kinds of value, and by distinguishing *prima facie* from *ultima facie* value, we have a pleasing account of the idea that knowledge and understanding are always and everywhere and of necessity valuable.

There remains a problem for this view, however. The value of knowledge and understanding presupposes the value of truth itself, for these cognitive states are factive states, in the sense that one cannot know or understand that *p* without it being true that *p*.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when we move beyond the propositional level to the objectual level, something similar is true. One can understand the rise and fall of the Third Reich without having every feature exactly right, but at least for the central features of the correct account of this rise and fall, error is not compatible with understanding. In this way, objectual knowledge and understanding are at least

quasi-factive. Clarifying this notion of quasi-factivity would take us too far afield, so I will not address this point further, for the point of significance for our context is the way in which the importance of truth underlies the value of knowledge and understanding, given this factivity. If truth doesn't matter, the value of knowledge and understanding is threatened; and if some truths are significant and others not, the universal and unqualified value is threatened as well.

Here I will not address points of view that claim that truth has no significance whatsoever. There is a growing body of literature addressing this strange doctrine, and I will not add to it here.<sup>7</sup> I will assume that truth matters, but even given this assumption a problem remains. It is the problem of axiologically negative truths, to which I now turn.

## II. Bad Truth and Pointless Truth

As with knowledge itself, the value of truth clearly varies. Sometimes, the truth will set you free, and sometimes, the truth hurts. Other times, the truth is pointless, or uninteresting, or trivial. At the same time, knowledge matters, and understanding is to be prized, and at first pass, at any rate, the verbs 'know' and 'understand' are factive in central epistemic uses.<sup>8</sup> These cognitive achievements are important and valuable in part because of this factive character, and thus the value of knowledge and understanding depends on the value of truth. So if truth has negative or neutral value, it becomes difficult to endorse the view that knowledge and understanding have unrestricted value. I will argue, however, that these difficulties can be overcome. I will argue that the problems created by bad truth and pointless truth do not undermine the universal and unqualified value of knowledge and understanding.

Consider first the examples of bad truth. We can take the same approach to the problem of bad truth that we took to the possibility of knowledge that is bad for us. First we should remind ourselves that the value involved in claims about the significance or importance of knowledge and understanding is a purely theoretical or cognitive value, and thus that if such value depends on the value of truth, the relevant kind of value must be purely theoretical as well. As is often the case in philosophy, the purchase power of a characterization depends on its contrasts. Here, the notion of a purely cognitive value derives its purchase power from a contrast between the cognitive and the affective aspects of human beings. Beliefs and knowledge are cognitive states; desires, hopes, wishes, and wants are affective states. We might then put the point about purely cognitive value in terms of something that would matter to an individual when we ignore anything that matters to that individual in virtue of some relationship to affective states. In short, something has purely cognitive value when it has value to individuals who care about nothing, though of course such a characterization isn't quite accurate: we don't really know whether it is even possible to care about nothing at all. But hyperbole can be instructive nonetheless, to point us to the idea of purely theoretical value in contrast with other values including practical have. To have purely theoretical value is thus a value that remains even when these other values are controlled for.

We can think of the way out of the problem of bad truth in the following way (a way that is doubly useful because it not only addresses the problem of bad truth but also will help us see why the same kind of reply cannot be given to the problem of pointless truth). The space of value can be modeled in terms of a two-dimensional vector space. Values of every kind are represented in this space as vectors, vectors for moral value, aesthetic value, epistemic value,

practical value, etc. Such vectors, to simplify, obey the standard operations of addition, multiplication, and negation, thereby generating overall results for combination of vectors, allowing the space in question to represent the all-things-considered value of any given item in addition to representing all the subspecies of overall value as well.

In light of such a model, we can explain away the negative remarks about truth that constitute the problem of bad truth. In this category are truths which generate negative moral and practical value through our awareness of them. They also generate positive value of the sort related to epistemology in virtue of their purely cognitive and theoretical value, but there is no guarantee that such value trumps the negative moral and practical value of the truth in question. It thus may be that we are better off remaining clueless concerning such truths. The problem of bad truth is thus no different in kind from the issue raised by the idea that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and that true opinion works just as well as knowledge for securing practical benefits. All that is needed is a distinction between *prima facie* value of a purely cognitive or theoretical sort and *ultima facie* value, and the problem is solved.

Pointless truths (such as the truth about the precise number of grains of sand in a given container), however, raise a different issue. If we suppose that calling a truth pointless is to make a remark about the all-things-considered value of a given truth, then we should be able to explain how the mathematical operations on the various vectors of the space in question generate the zero vector as the result for such a truth. For we are assuming that every truth has epistemic value, and thus if a given truth ends up being all-things-considered pointless, we need an explanation of such a neutral value is compatible with positive epistemic value. To reach this conclusion, we have to identify some negative vector or vectors to offset the positive value the truth has in virtue

of its purely cognitive or theoretical value. But when dealing with typical examples of pointless truths, there are no such negative values (e.g., counting the grains of sand may be tiring, but then again, it may invigorate; it may waste time, but one may have time to waste, etc.). So the existence of all-things-considered pointless truths raises a problem for the understanding of the value of truth just presented.

What is needed to retain the unqualified value of truth and the related factive cognitive states is the possibility of undercutting values or the absence of such, so that the complete absence of any value beyond epistemic value may in some cases undercut the cognitive value in question. For such undercutting values, modeling by a two-dimensional vector space is not possible, since the interaction in question is not an instance of the addition or multiplication of two vectors. In some cases, a neutral value for practical and other non-epistemic concerns leaves overall value intact (perhaps the deep truths about distant regions of our universe are like that) and in other cases a neutral value for practical and other non-epistemic concerns undercuts epistemic value, leaving the truth in question a pointless one.

It is this difference between two types of pointless truths, both of which have no non-theoretical value but only one of which seems to have theoretical value, that underlies, I believe, Ernest Sosa's remark that the view that truth always and everywhere has positive value is one that he "hardly understands."<sup>9</sup> If we classify one kind of pointless truth in terms of the concept of basic research of the sort we engage in for its own sake, such as investigating far reaches of the universe solely for the purpose of understanding what the universe is like, there remains the other class of pointless truths, of which a good example might be the precise number of blades of grass in my yard. There is, of course, no perplexity involved in the idea that a thing having a certain

kind of value can fail to be all-things-considered valuable. No one should be perplexed anymore by the interaction of different types of value. But the problem of pointless truths cannot be explained away in terms of the interaction of values. Instead, the problem of pointless truths is that the absence of other values sometimes resembles the situation of basic research that we don't judge to be worthless, and sometimes resembles the situation of counting blades of grass in my yard, which we do judge to be worthless. One can say that what is happening in the latter case (but not in the former) is an undercutting of the value of truth by the absence of other values, but why should we? Why not just grant the point that there are some truths that have nothing going for them from an axiological point of view?

I think there is a good answer to this question, and thus a good defense of the undercutter model of the ubiquitous and unrestricted value of truth, but it is worth approaching this issue a bit more indirectly. The indirect approach begins with a position hardly any philosopher will accept, but which has fairly wide currency in our culture. Once we see why we shouldn't accept this unrefined and boorish approach, we will be in a position to see why the undercutter model is the right way to understand the value of pointless truths.

I begin, then, with the ham-fisted and indelicate view that when all non-cognitive values go to zero, so does overall value; every pointless truth is in the same category, not deserving of any of our time or attention. Call this position "crass pragmatism." According to the crass pragmatist, there is no such thing as purely cognitive value, at least when no other values are present, so there is no more reason to engage in basic research whose sole purpose is to further our understanding than there is to count blades of grass in my yard. Any given person might have idiosyncracies that lead to an interest in such things, but being valued by a person or even

by a large group of people should not be confused with such a thing being valuable. The crass pragmatist exploits this truism to infer that any truth lacking other than purely theoretical value is an indefeasibly pointless truth. Such a position may maintain that cognitive value is one kind of value, but not that important a value, since it cannot exist on its own apart from other values.

Armed with such a view, it is easy to argue that basic research should not be pursued and that public policy should never favor funding basic research. By “basic research,” I mean research that has no practical benefit and aims at no success other than that of knowing more and understanding better. Noting this implication of the view should give us pause, since, to resort to a bit of hyperbole, nobody in their right mind thinks that only applied research is worth doing. Not only does basic research sometimes yield unexpected practical benefits, but investigation aimed solely at understanding a given phenomenon often involves such pure joy and satisfaction that one wonders what is wrong with those who want it excluded from an account of what makes life good. So, if the undercutter model is going to be avoided, it won’t be on the basis of crass pragmatism. Instead, some more sophisticated view will be needed that recognizes that not all pointless truths are in the same category.

If we grant the point that some basic research is worth doing in spite of the fact that it aims at truths that are, theoretical understanding aside, pointless truths, appealing to pointless truths to undermine the claims I have made about the value of understanding and knowledge requires an explanation of why basic research truths are valuable in spite of being pointless. If the best explanation of the value of basic research can be extended easily to any truth whatsoever that lacks non-theoretical value, then we are well on our way to defending the undercutter model of pointless truth and thus the unrestricted value of truth. The question we should ask, then, is

what sort of explanation can be given for the value of basic research?

### III. Basic Research and Pointless Truth

The crass pragmatist insists that basic research is not worth doing because it is aimed at pointless truths, but there is a more enlightened pragmatism that finds room for such research. The enlightened pragmatist still opposes the intellectualist view that even what I'm calling pointless truths have purely intellectual value and are thus worth knowing. The enlightened pragmatist takes comfort in a point highlighted by the paradox of hedonism. Even if aiming at pleasure or happiness is not the best way to achieve it, it doesn't follow that goodness and rightness are not best understood in such terms. Just so, even if basic research involves inquiry for its own sake, it doesn't follow that its value is not best understood in terms of some connection to non-intellectual concerns. We have already noted that basic research is not aimed at solving practical problems and difficulties, and there is no obvious way to show that solutions to problems of practice are best found by doing basic research. The refuge taken by the enlightened pragmatist is in the idea that basic research is worth doing, not because of its practical benefits, but because of the possibility or chance of such.

The intellectualist doubts that the enlightened pragmatist can give a suitable clarification of that view that will yield the conclusion that there are some truly pointless truths, ones for which there is no need to cite any factor of any sort to undercut or undermine some supposed value they have, and in the present context, such a result is needed in order for the appeal to enlightened pragmatism to have the consequences sought of it. Since the difference between

these two kinds of point truths lies in the possibility or chance or potential for practical significance, the enlightened pragmatist needs to give us an account of the key notion of the possibility or potential for practical benefit so as to distinguish between the pointless truths that are suitable objects of basic research and the remainder of pointless truths. Here the pure intellectualist, aiming to defend the undercutter model of the unrestricted value of truth, will claim that there is no explanation available to do the job. If the possibility in question is logical or metaphysical possibility, the pure intellectualist wins, since it is hard to find any truth not significant in this sense. Any truth can be important in this sense, if only because there could be an unusual and powerful ruler who made it worthwhile to believe. The appeal to logical or metaphysical necessity lacks the power to sort pointless truths into those that are worth investigating and those that are not.

The issue is similar when the appeal is to chance rather than mere possibility. Which truths have no chance of being significant to our practical or non-intellectual interests? To hold that there are such truths, we'd need a notion of chance that tells us that even though it is possible that there is an unusual ruler of the sort imagined above, there is no chance of there being such a ruler. We might wonder how to tell the difference between possibilities that have no chance of obtaining and those that have some chance of obtaining, but the enlightened pragmatist can insist that we not confuse the metaphysical point about which truths are worth knowing with the epistemological point about how we'd be in a position to know which truths have that feature. Even if we would find it difficult or impossible to know which truths have no chance of being practically significant, the enlightened pragmatist can still maintain that this is just another regrettable feature of the human condition. We muddle through here as best we can, such a

pragmatist may note, but what counts is the existence of a chance of practical significance for any truth worth knowing, not whether we can know which truths fall into this category.

There is a more basic problem with the proposal, though. At this point, all the enlightened pragmatist can legitimately claim is the following possibility: some truths might have no chance of practical significance even if it is possible for them to have such significance. But sheer speculation can replace needed argument in defense of enlightened pragmatism. The claim that needs defense is that there is a difference between pointless truths worth investigating and those not worth investigating. The proposal is that the difference depends on the chance of something significant coming out of the investigation. To defend the proposal, the enlightened pragmatist must argue that some pointless truths have no chance of significance; merely to point out that some truths *might* have no chance of significance is not on point. Such mere speculation gives us only the weakest epistemic possibility of such, on par with the claim that, given the nature of our experience, we might be brains in a vat. Arguing that the central theses of a view are merely epistemically possible in this sense doesn't count as a defense of the view. It doesn't even count as a defense of the logical or metaphysical possibility of the view, as is shown by the fact that, until seeing the point of Russell's paradox, the comprehension axiom was epistemically possible for Frege.

Moreover, if the standard is raised so that the enlightened pragmatist has to find examples regarding which we know or rationally believe them to have no potential or possibility for a connection to practical interests, the enlightened pragmatist's position will not withstand scrutiny. It must be admitted that any truth can come to be practically significant—that is the lesson of the example of the unusual ruler above. Moreover, it is easy to imagine such a ruler

only counting prior knowledge of the truth in question: once he or she comes to power, only those who've already investigated the question get the reward. The enlightened pragmatist can point out that this possibility should have little or no effect on our practical decisions about what kind of research to fund and what questions to investigate, and that point is surely correct. But the point is irrelevant. The enlightened pragmatist, in the present context, needs an account on which some truths are truly pointless in the sense that no potential or possibility of a connection to practical interests can explain any interest in such truths in order to provide an account on which truth lacks the ubiquitous and unrestricted value the intellectualist claims.

These difficulties with enlightened pragmatism will not be decisive unless the alternative, intellectualist position can explain the role that practical concerns legitimately play in curtailing and encouraging intellectual discovery. We thus turn to the intellectualist model to see its resources on this issue, and the implications of this position for the idea that there are some truly pointless truths.

#### IV. Intellectualist Positions

As with the pragmatic view, the intellectualist view comes in two varieties. The simple version of the view is the bullet-biting version. When faced with apparent counterexamples to the ubiquitous value of truth, such as the example concerning the number of blades of grass in my yard, the bullet-biters simply shake their head in disagreement. All truth is valuable, they insist, and there is nothing more that needs to be said.

One could wish for a more sophisticated response, especially since the bullet-biting

version of the view has no resources to explain the obvious point that some investigations really aren't worth undertaking. The more sophisticated intellectualist view grants that there are examples such as the blades of grass example that need to be explained away, and the sophisticated view claims to provide such an explanation. The sophisticated intellectualist has two resources for handling them, one on the practical side and one on the theoretical side.

On the practical side, the sophisticated intellectualist does not deny or ignore the pressing practical context in which all of life finds itself, and may readily grant that failure of practical import may often trump intellectual value alone (though, as I will suggest below, some cultures, such as our own, find it too easy to resort to this idea, and to their detriment). In some cases of failure of practical import, the intellectualist may agree with the enlightened pragmatist that the potential or possibility of practical benefits can all-things-considered justify inquiry. But even when such potential or possibility doesn't justify inquiry, the intellectualist notes that it doesn't follow that the truths are pointless. Instead, the source of our lack of concern for such truths is the pressing practical issues we face that require, all things considered, to favor inquiry at least indirectly justified in terms of practical issues over those known or justifiedly believed to have no such potential. If our pressing practical concerns were absent, both individually and corporately, the worry about pointless truths arising from practical concerns would not arise, and the value of such truths would not be threatened by the overriding concerns of practical life.

There is a similar point to be noted on the theoretical side. In purely theoretical inquiry, there is a trade-off between truth and informational content. Adding one to every known sum will generate additional truths, and endless applications of disjunctive syllogism will do the same, but will do little to enhance informational content. The significance of informational

content, however, does not undermine the value of truths that are useless from the point of view of the systematization involved in theories, where the basic features of the theory rate high in terms of informational content. The importance of such systematization has two sources, one in the value of truth itself (since there are truths about how best to systematize the truths about a given subject matter) but also from our cognitive limitations. We have only a three-pound brain, and its capacities are limited by basic biology. With these limitations, efficiency in cognition is a high priority, and systematization of information contributes importantly to efficiency in thought and action. As with the practical insignificance of some truths, the intellectualist here can explain away the source of the pointlessness idea through appeal to contrasting tasks and comparative judgements: the importance of informational content derives from limitations on our cognitive abilities, showing that the need for informational content may often trump the value of inquiry revealing truths with little or no informational content or potential for usefulness in systematizing a body of information into a simple and wieldy theory. But such a contrast is no different from the contrast between truth and potential for practical significance used to explain why basic research is often worth doing. In each case, the fact that there is something else more worthy of pursuit doesn't show that the less worthy is of no worth at all. The intuition of no worth at all is seated in a recognition of the importance of practical matters and the need for information content, but the no worth conclusion doesn't follow, says the sophisticated intellectualist.

All that follows is that the value in question can't be revealed except when we imaginatively control for these trumping factors. To imagine such a situation is to imagine a world where no practical needs are left unmet and where no limitation of cognitive power creates any need for informational content to trump any value for truths with little or no content. For

such beings, there is no need to favor organized theories or elegant axiomatizations based on any practical or non-epistemic interests such as efficiency for prediction and control or even the beauty of such a system. There is also, of course, no reason to castigate such systematizations. They have the same value that any truth has, says the intellectualist. Moreover, there is a fairly decisive way to appreciate why the intellectualist is right about such an imaginative situation. We should ask ourselves, regarding possible individuals in such a cost-free environment, what the cognitive ideal would involve. Here the intellectualists have millenia of theological reflection on their side. Part of the cognitive ideal, whatever else it may involve, is knowledge of all truths; omniscience, for short. But for omniscience to be part of the ideal, no truth can be pointless enough to play no role at all in the story of what it takes to be cognitively ideal.

Moreover, any weaker account of the cognitive ideal quickly collapses into the traditional account. Suppose we say that the cognitive ideal only requires knowing important truths and doesn't require knowing (all) trivial and pointless truths. Even so, it will be important to know what the difference is between the two classes of truths, and what features make a given truth belong in one class rather than in another. Given this fact, the inference from the restricted account to the traditional account is fairly obvious: to know these things requires knowing which truths are in fact pointless, and thus knowing all the pointless truths. So whatever account one gives of pointless truths, they cannot have a nature which is such that it is not part of the cognitive ideal to know that they are true.

One might try to avoid this implication by claiming that one can classify certain issues or problems as trite, trivial, or pointless, and do so without knowing on which side the truth falls. Thus, one might know that, regardless of the exact number of blades of grass in my yard, the

exact number is a pointless truth.

There is a simple thought experiment to show why this idea won't work. Imagine a world with two beings, each claiming to be cognitively ideal. One is omniscient and the other isn't. The less-than-omniscient being claims to be cognitively ideal in virtue of knowing all the important truths, but the omniscient being demurs. For among the important truths are the claims about what the omniscient being knows that the less-than-omniscient being doesn't know. Even if the issue concerning a given proposition is assumed to be pointless and not worthy of being known, the fact that the omniscient being knows the truth value in question and the less-than-omniscient being does not is itself a distinctive difference between the two beings. Moreover, the specific knowledge in question is also an important difference: that the omniscient being knows that the claim is true, for example, and that the less-than-omniscient being doesn't, establishes a significant difference in terms of their grasp of the precise nature of the world in which they find themselves. Once one appreciates this result of the thought experiment, one can see why lesser accounts of the cognitive ideal collapse into the stronger account.<sup>10</sup>

So the point remains that the cognitive ideal in terms of omniscience, or something as close as possible to omniscience, still provides an argument for the intellectualist's undercutting model of the unrestricted and ubiquitous value of truth. The existence of pointless truths is compatible with the undercutting model and the facts about cognitive ideality show that this model is the best explanation of such truths. This result shows that pointless truths aren't pointless in any way that undermines the universal and unqualified value of truth and the related values of knowledge and understanding.

## Conclusion

So the way in which omniscience provides a clear picture of the cognitive ideal presents a strong argument on behalf of intellectualism. The most plausible version of intellectualism also recognizes the way in which practical concerns are typically so pressing that the value of truth can disappear from view because of the overriding importance of these concerns. But an overridden value is a value nonetheless, and the presence of such a value allows the account of the universal and unqualified value of knowledge and understanding to withstand the challenge of pointless truths. There are truths that are not worth knowing and which don't deserve our attention, but these points are best interpreted in terms of overall value in which the value of truth is undercut by other factors and issues. Such truths thus do not threaten the more fundamental and ubiquitous values from which overall value is generated. Every truth has such fundamental value, and the best account of the value of knowledge and understanding is in terms of the same type of fundamental value, one that is defeasible but ever present nonetheless.

The most general way to put this point is as follows. There are two kinds of pointless truths. One kind is explained by the vector space model, in which the defeasible value of truth of rebutted by other values in that vector space. The other kind is not explained by the vector space model. This kind of pointless truth is pointless because the intrinsic value of truth is undercut, but not rebutted, by the lack of other positive values. And the argument that this latter category is a case of undercutting, rather than a case of no intrinsic value for such truths, is the argument from the cognitive ideal, which cannot be satisfied without knowing all truths. So the proper conclusion to draw is that there are pointless truths, but their existence does not undermine the

unrestricted value of truth, and hence that nothing about the value of truth undermines the idea that the knowledge and understanding possess their cognitive value in a fully unrestricted way, both in terms of space and time and in terms of modality.

It is important to note that nothing about this account presupposes any particular answer to the hard questions about how the value vectors interact or under what conditions undercutting occurs. The defeat of the intrinsic value of truth might occur quite regularly and across a broad range of topics and issues, so that the crassest of restrictions on basic research is justified; or such defeat might be so rare that nearly every restriction on basic research is unwarranted. Nothing I have written implies anything one way or another on these questions. But since much of what I have written adopts a perspective for the sake of argument that takes a rather restrictive tone on this question, I would be remiss not to point out the dangers of such a perspective. Unreflective perspectives on this issue are typically crassly pragmatic, but even cursory reflection on the human condition reveals that first-glance perspectives on anything so complicated are suspect in the extreme. Furthermore, when we contrast this unreflective perspective with a more reflective contrast between the cultural experience of American consumer culture and what J.S. Mill would call higher quality pleasures, it is very difficult to come to any conclusion other than that our own culture is vastly mistaken about the conditions under which intellectual value is defeated by practical concerns of this sort (to say nothing of the horrendous distortion of what our practical concerns really are). Such issues are ones for another time and place, but since I have been willing to grant something like this perspective for the sake of argument above, it would be misleading here to close without distancing myself from such a perspective. One can adopt this perspective and still retain the intellectualist model. But the beautiful pictures of the good life

contrast with this quotidian picture of the good life in the way that, say, Monet's paintings contrast with velvet Elvises.

## Endnotes

1. In *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), though my earliest thinking about the matter traces to "Why Should Inquiring Minds Want to Know?" *The Monist* 81.3 (1998), pp. 426-451 (Reprinted in Sosa, Kim, Fantl, and McGrath, eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2008) and even earlier to "The Basic Notion of Justification," Christopher Menzel, co-author, *Philosophical Studies* 59 (1990), pp. 235-261..
2. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 79.
3. Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 64.
4. Philip Percival, "The Pursuit of Epistemic Good", *Metaphilosophy* 34 (2003), p. 38.
5. Ward E. Jones, "Why do we value knowledge?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34.4 (October 1997), p. 434.
6. This point should not be confused with the claim that there are no uses of the terms 'know' and 'understand' that are not factive uses. If knowledge and understanding are not factive states, it may in fact be easier to sustain their universal, unqualified, and necessary value. So one may take the factivity claim in the text in terms of granting an assumption to make the defense harder, if one thinks these states are not factive.
7. See Michael Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and*

*Constructivism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8. Catherine Elgin argues that understanding is not factive, and Allan Hazlett questions the same claim about knowledge. See Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Hazlett, “The Myth of Factive Verbs,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming 2007. I believe that distinguishing between understanding a theory and understanding the reality the theory attempts to characterize is the key to avoiding Elgin’s arguments (for the development of this claim, see Jonathan L. Kvanvig, “Responses to Critics,” *Epistemic Value Essays*, edited by Duncan Pritchard, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2008)) , and even if Hazlett is correct, there are still central and important uses of ‘knows’ that are factive, and it is legitimate for the epistemologist to focus on one of these, as I am doing here.

9. Ernest Sosa, “For the Love of Truth?” in *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*, edited by Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

10. The issues in the text should not be confused with orthogonal issues about the paradoxes of completeness discussed in, e.g., Patrick Grim’s *The Incomplete Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). The pointless truths in focus in the text are not the sort of things that create such paradoxes, and if incompleteness of the sort Grim argues for is unavoidable, the distinction between two beings, one that approaches omniscience but never reaches it and one that doesn’t approach it because of never attending to pointless truths, remains.