

tion “Who is man?”. Instead, he leads readers to find the answers themselves and articulate them in normative terms. The main question here is “What makes us human beings?”

One could therefore say that the author is not investigating humanity in the general sense, but the humanity of people. For it is the human side of us that is being lost in “info-techno-culture” in which the other person can seem like an inhuman machine or tool. Hence, the book as a whole has something of a utopic sense of society in which people are seeking their humanity. Nonetheless the question remains – is such a society even feasible? Despite the utopic element I believe that humans, who have become lost in today’s world, should continue to seek answers to these questions. The reason being that doing so could significantly influence the future direction of human society. Emil Višňovský’s book is therefore a stimulating addition to anthropological studies into the humanity of today and tomorrow.

Katarína Sklutová

Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, Bratislava
sklutova2@uniba.sk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9272-2091>

Martin Nuhlíček: The Value Problem of Knowledge

Bratislava, Comenius University in Bratislava 2019. 107 pp.

Science, Society, Values: A Philosophical Analysis of Their Mutual Relations and Interactions, is the name of a research project that has produced many important publications, including an academic monograph on the value problem of knowledge. Although this complex issue has been widely discussed abroad, Martin Nuhlíček contends that this is not true of Slovak philosophical research. This book seems then to be an attempt to engage the Slovak philosophical community in tackling one of the five most pressing issues in contemporary epistemology.

The value problem of knowledge. More attention should be devoted to defining this research area. It is usually automatically divided up into separate (well-known) areas – specific axiological questions and scientific knowledge of values usually spring to mind. But here we are concerned with the *epistemic value of knowledge*. The question is located on the *margins* of epistemology and axiology, which is an interdisciplinary space that might offer a qualitatively new perspective.

Right at the beginning Nuhlíček outlines the basis of his belief in the *meaningfulness* of the question of the value of knowledge: “Everything suggests that know-

ledge represents a cognitive state that is associated with a non-negligible positive value.” (p. 7) Here he asks many interesting questions but seems to gloss over the philosophical ones. What does “positive” mean? In what way is the value of knowledge “positive”? (in evolutionary terms? social terms? political terms? or generally?). The author does not spell this out, although he later suggests that he is interested in value per se. There is also the (absent) criterion of knowledge – for what? Should knowledge have an *epistemic* value in itself? The question can be rephrased as: Are we looking for value in relation to cognition – of knowledge? These questions may not reflect the author’s original intention, but perhaps offer some substance. Nuhlíček says that “we value knowledge as valuable, that is a fact. But explaining in detail why knowledge is valuable is surprisingly challenging.” (Ibid.) Why not ask the question: Why do we *consider* knowledge to be valuable? We cannot simply dismiss it as “a fact”. Indeed, Nuhlíček ultimately reveals that this “fact” is actually an *intuition*.

The roots of thinking about the value of knowledge can be found in Plato, especially in his *Meno* dialogue, from which the key Meno problem emerged. The work of Michael Williams (*Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology*, 2001) is considered the beginning of modern thinking on the value problem of knowledge and opened up current issues in epistemology.

The aim of *The Value Problem of Knowledge* is to fill a gap (?) in the Slovak philosophical literature and to give a brief (modern) history of the problem of the value of knowledge and the current state of scholarship on the theme, in pursuit of a possible route to finding an acceptable solution. The book is clearly set out and well-arranged. Nuhlíček states that the value of knowledge will be tackled only as an *epistemological* problem, but if he noted at the beginning that it is on the margins of epistemology and axiology (and that is what makes it unique), is that not a problematic limitation?

The starting point – analytical epistemology – is set out at the beginning so that readers know what to expect: “The subject of interest thus becomes the concept of knowledge...” (p. 10) However, as long as we are still living people and not just well-trained scholars, we should always consider the ultimate question about the usefulness and harmfulness of knowledge *for life*. If the author emphasizes that the problem of the value of knowledge should now be regarded as the most basic question in connection with knowledge, he could at least admit that the importance of this very current issue in philosophical epistemology lies mainly and perhaps only in its living connection to Life. It is therefore, not (only) language games with concepts, but above all a critical philosophical-axiological analysis of the problem that is needed if we are to understand the value of knowledge for our time. Of course, with these reflections we do not wish to question the seriousness of the scientific text and author’s erudition, but it is worth pointing out that to separate the value problem of knowledge from other phenomena of existence is to engage with an *abstrac-*

tion. But in that case how should we understand Nuhlíček's claim that he wants to consider the value of knowledge "for people, human goals and interests"? (p. 17)

In exposing the problem, it is essential to assert that knowledge is valuable, and Nuhlíček notes that *this view is generally shared*. J. Kvanvig's *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (2003) stirred the epistemological waters, stimulating discussions on the value of knowledge as a new perspective for thinking about traditional epistemological problems. Value is now also being considered in relation to other phenomena (truth, reasonable certainty, etc.). In short, in 2000 there was a *value turn* regarding the problem of epistemic values, with special emphasis on knowledge. However, Kvanvig made the following *tricky request*: "An explanation of what knowledge is should also clarify the value of knowledge and vice versa". If Kvanvig – and Nuhlíček – despair at the lack of discussion about the value of knowledge in the history of epistemology, well, what can we say? The history of epistemology is part of the history of philosophy and spiritual cultural history in general – and can certainly offer some ideas that radically question the marginalisation of the problem of the value of knowledge (Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, the existentialists, etc.). Furthermore, does a demand for the development of a theory explaining the nature of knowledge and clearly linking it to the value of knowledge (which Nuhlíček considers an "unexpectedly challenging task") not in principle mean a revived Platonism?

But what is the *epistemic value* we wish to attribute to knowledge? According to the definition given in the book, it is "the value that we attribute to epistemic states". These values may be final (independent) and instrumental (in the sense of a means). In the Meno problem, which addresses the issue of whether knowledge or true belief is more valuable, Nuhlíček indicates that his *intuitive beliefs* come down on the side of the final (fundamental) value of knowledge. He considers it sufficient to rely on "the perceived difference in value between knowledge and true belief". (p. 24)

The value of knowledge can also be formulated in terms of the so-called tripartite theory (D. Pritchard), which outlines three problems pertaining to the value of knowledge: 1. *Why is knowledge more valuable than true belief (opinion)?* 2. *Why is knowledge more valuable than any of its proper parts?* Here knowledge is defined as true belief composed of a set of constituents of knowledge dependent on an accepted theory of knowledge, and the status of the knowledge as justified. Non-knowledge is therefore an incomplete set of the elements constituting a certain theory of knowledge, which violates the claim that knowledge is superior to true belief (e.g. the Gettier problem). 3. *Why is knowledge distinctively valuable?* Knowledge is not just the sum of its components, but has a higher value in itself. This is the qualitative difference between knowledge and other states and is key. Nuhlíček observes that the *force of the justification* plays an important role in making true belief knowledge (strong and weak conceptions of knowledge).

If justification is considered to be the source of the value of knowledge, then we are faced with this definition: knowledge is formed as a true, justified belief, and a set of components that lends it a higher value than true belief. The problem is that the question of justification is one of the most problematic epistemological problems. Nuhlíček goes on to present theories dealing with justification in search of the value of knowledge (internalist theories – subjectivism and the Gettier problem; externalist theories – reliability and the swamping problem), while arguing that none is entirely successful in justifying the higher epistemic value of knowledge. Nonetheless, internalist theories at least allow for an axiological distinction between true belief and justified true belief, although it cannot be called knowledge.

So what next? Should we deny the value of knowledge? “But then it would be appropriate to explain the origin and cause of the widespread intuition of the higher value of knowledge, which may not be easy.” (p. 54) Here we could again remind the author of the importance of conducting a critical historical and philosophical analysis – maybe we would find that “intuition” is just a deep-rooted metaphysical belief in the ontological significance of humans. What is more, there would be no harm in seeking help from natural science; the “intuition” may be a simple variant of the voice of the selfish gene that gave us an evolutionary advantage... In any case, as far as the value problem of knowledge – presented as a terra incognita in Slovak philosophical circles – and its complexity is concerned, one should avoid shutting oneself up – both logically and argumentatively – in the compartment of just one philosophical discipline, and should remain radically open to the historically evolved character of the problem. Furthermore, perhaps as part of critical reflection on its nature, we could take a similar step in axiology, and explain the value problem of knowledge in relation to the present, “for people”. I do not think it is necessary or desirable to seek to build the value problem of knowledge from scratch. All Slovak epistemologists and axiologists (e.g. Gálik, Démuth, Černík, Városová, Sisáková, Brožík, et al.) could certainly provide at least some inspiration for thought on the value of knowledge from their research.

However, Nuhlíček is not to be deterred (he insists on “our” concept of knowledge), and inclines to a rethinking of the central concepts of epistemology along the lines of J. Kvanvig and D. Pritchard. Here we turn to the concept of *understanding*, which promises to give us what we expected from knowledge. The essence of Kvanvig’s theory is that the advantage of the concept of understanding lies in the fact that, in contrast to the concept of knowledge, it directs attention to a whole complex of propositions and their hierarchical relationships and connections. The ability to *explain* thus becomes the criterion of truthfulness. One can argue with Nuhlíček’s definition of what it means to “understand” (especially the example of poetry). Is it really – ultimately – the ability to “fully explain or apply”? (p. 58)

The Aristotelian approach is quite different in offering *virtue epistemology*, in which knowledge is a performative act (Sosa and his AAA model). Agent reliabi-

lism brings into play the question of the reliability of the overall cognitive character of the individual, supported by cognitive virtues. All three problems of the value of knowledge are solved, but at what cost? We have to identify knowledge with cognitive success and vice versa. It is here that the thesis about the final (fundamental) value of knowledge falls down. Nuhlíček finds this unacceptable and so formulates a “new problem of the value of knowledge” aimed at locating the value of knowledge in a hierarchical relationship with the final value of understanding such that Kvanvig’s desire for a comprehensive theory of the value of knowledge is fulfilled. Nuhlíček therefore outlines the possibilities provided by another *pluralistic conception (of the sources) of the value of knowledge*. It compares knowledge to a “Swiss Army knife” (M. Weiner). This concept emphasizes the intertextuality, situationality and variability of the use of the concept of knowledge. This leads to a description of the elements that convey knowledge in natural language. The advantage here is that it goes beyond tripartite theory, since knowledge is not simply reduced to justified true belief. Nuhlíček explains the difference between the pluralistic concept and the three assumptions regarding the final value of knowledge (distinctiveness, universality, necessity), but as he theoretically leans towards pluralism and wants to consider the epistemic significance of variable qualities, he will probably have to go back to the nature of knowledge, to its historical and philosophical and scientific reflections. Thus the initial criteria that Nuhlíček set for himself in the introduction (pp. 9 – 10) are essentially reductionist, given the complexity of the value problem of knowledge. In the end, I believe that he arrives at this realisation unintentionally when he mentions, for instance, the hypothesis of the evolutionary development of knowledge (p. 96).

Finally, Nuhlíček explains what the theory of pluralism still ‘lacks’ from the point of view of its potential to become a comprehensive theory of the value of knowledge (probably the author’s unshakeable desire for fundamental value) and highlights the “risks”, but these might instead be seen as inherent in an authentic approach to the *nature of knowledge*.

Nuhlíček does a good job of presenting the current state of the research on the value of knowledge. He wants to stick with the broadest, directly intuitive understanding of the concepts of knowledge and value, and this is paradoxical given that he wishes to follow the problem at the level of analytical epistemology, which requires a logically accurate analysis of the line of argument. Nonetheless, his book is a standard academic monograph that will contribute to and enrich the academic debate, at least on the nature of epistemology itself.

Eva Dědečková

Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava
floevede@savba.sk