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Citation for published version:

Pritchard, D 2015, 'Engel on Pragmatic Encroachment and Epistemic Value', *Synthese*, vol. 194, pp. 1477-1486. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0755-8>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1007/s11229-015-0755-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0755-8)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Synthese

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For *Festschrift for Pascal Engel*,
(eds.) J. Dutant, D. Fasso & A. Meylan, (Publisher TBC).

ENGEL ON PRAGMATIC ENCROACHMENT AND EPISTEMIC VALUE

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ABSTRACT. I discuss Engel's (2009) critique of pragmatic encroachment in epistemology and his related discussion of epistemic value. While I am sympathetic to Engel's remarks on the former, I think he makes a crucial misstep when he relates this discussion to the latter topic. The goal of this paper is to offer a better articulation of the relationship between these two epistemological issues, with the ultimate goal of lending further support to Engel's scepticism about pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. As we will see, key to this articulation will be the drawing of a distinction between two importantly different ways of thinking about epistemic value.

0. INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by saying that it is a pleasure and an honour to be able to contribute to this *festschrift* for Pascal Engel. In a long and highly distinguished career, Pascal has made distinctive contributions to many of the most important philosophical debates. He has also been an active and prominent member of the European philosophical scene. I know that I have learnt a lot by engaging with his work and with him personally over the years, and I am very pleased to be able to contribute to this volume in tribute to the man on his sixtieth birthday. Pascal is now at the peak of his intellectual powers, and long may he continue! (As Woody Allen is reported to have quipped on his sixtieth birthday: 'I'm sixty years old—a third of my life is over already!' I have similar optimism for my friend Pascal's longevity).

It is customary in these volumes to follow one's eulogy to the person being honoured with

a devastating critical broadside against his or her work. I'm afraid that I must disappoint the reader on this score, as no such broadside is in the offering here. This is because I am broadly in agreement with much of what is to be found in Pascal's work. Instead, I want to focus on a very interesting recent piece by Pascal which is concerned with the question of pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. I will argue that there is an interesting way of developing Pascal's position in this regard. As we will see, key to this development will be the introduction of a distinction regarding epistemic value which I think is both extremely important but also often overlooked.¹

1. ENGEL ON PRAGMATIC ENCROACHMENT AND EPISTEMIC VALUE

Pragmatic encroachment in epistemology is best understood in terms of what it rejects. In particular, it is usually understood as the rejection of the widely held view (until quite recently anyway) that whether an agent counts as having knowledge is purely a function of epistemic factors, and not determined, even in part, by non-epistemic factors (such as the practical consequences of having knowledge).² Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath describe this view as *epistemological purism*, and express it as follows:

Epistemological purism: two subjects alike with respect to their strength of epistemic position with respect to p are alike with respect to whether they know that p (or at least with respect to whether they are in a position to know that p). (Fantl & McGrath 2010, 562; Cf. Fantl & McGrath 2007, 558)

Fantl and McGrath reject epistemological purism and argue that two subjects alike in their epistemic position might nonetheless differ in terms of whether they have knowledge in virtue of non-epistemic (e.g., purely practical) features of their situation. They are not alone in arguing for this claim.³

The cases marshalled in support of pragmatic encroachment in epistemology are now familiar. They characteristically involve two agents who are putatively in the same epistemic situation—they have the same overall evidence, say—but where the agents are in very different conditions from a practical point of view. So, for example, both agents have the same evidence about when a certain train will arrive, but whereas nothing much hangs on the correctness of the target belief for the one agent, a great deal hangs on its correctness for the other agent (the agent's livelihood, say). The thinking goes that we are less inclined to attribute knowledge to the second agent (the one in the 'high-stakes' context), and that this reveals that there is something amiss with epistemological purism, in that non-epistemic factors—in this case purely practical factors—are

having a bearing on whether an agent counts as having knowledge.

I don't want to get into such cases in detail here. My view, which broadly accords with Engel's (2009), is that we should not take our intuitions about these cases at face-value. More precisely, while I would grant that we do feel a *prima facie* pull to treat these two agents differently *vis-à-vis* their possession of knowledge, even despite their putative sameness of epistemic standings, I think there are better explanations available of why this is so.

For example, it seems plausible to me that conversational contexts might affect the propriety of knowledge ascriptions. This idea is particularly compelling when it comes to self-ascriptions of knowledge. In a conversational context where it is made clear that a lot hangs on the correctness of *p*, an unqualified claim to know that *p* might conversationally imply that one is in a particularly strong epistemic position with regard to *p*, one that is far higher than what one would typically demand for knowledge that *p*. This would explain one's reluctance to self-ascribe knowledge in such conditions in a way that is entirely compatible with epistemological purism. And once this point is granted about self-ascriptions of knowledge, it doesn't take too much imagination to see how this detail might have a bearing on our intuitions about knowledge ascriptions more generally. In particular, if we explicitly set to one side the question of whether it would be appropriate for our agent in the high-stakes to make an unqualified knowledge claim, and focus instead on whether this agent counts as having knowledge (bearing in mind too that it has already been granted that the counterpart agent has knowledge), then what is left of the intuition that we should issue a negative verdict to this question? My guess is: 'not much'.⁴

And note that we have only considered one defensive response to the cases in support of pragmatic encroachment in epistemology. Properly developed, I think that a range of responses can be made to this proposal. In particular—and here Engel (2009) is especially clear—we also need to keep in mind that pragmatic factors can have a bearing on such matters as whether one forms a view at all about a certain proposition without this thereby having any negative implications for epistemological purism.⁵

In any case, let us not try to settle the issues about pragmatic encroachment in epistemology here. It suffices to say that the position is controversial, and that there are at least points to be made against this proposal. Engel and myself stand with the epistemological purists on these questions. What interests me for the purposes of this paper is a conclusion which Engel draws from this claim, and which I think should be resisted. The conclusion in question is that Engel argues—see especially Engel (2009, §5)—that once we grant that there is no such phenomenon as pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, then it follows that the kind of pragmatic factors appealed to by proponents of this view cannot confer any value on knowledge. I want to

suggest that this is a mistake. Indeed, as we will see, my claim is that we can strengthen Engel's rejection of pragmatic encroachment by allowing the kind of pragmatic factors appealed to by proponents of this view as having a role to play in determining the value of knowledge.

Essentially, my point will be that provided we are clear about the manner in which pragmatic factors can confer value on knowledge, then one can accept this claim without it having any bearing at all on whether epistemological purism is true.

2. KNOWLEDGE, ACTION, AND EPISTEMIC VALUE

In order to sharpen up our discussion in this regard, let's focus on the claim that knowledge has a kind of practical value in virtue of its role in action. In particular, this is the claim that, at least in some suitably restricted sense, it is knowledge, as opposed to true belief, which guides action and which therefore plays a pivotal role in practical reasoning. Versions of this kind of thesis have been defended by a number of prominent philosophers, and Engel is happy to endorse a version of this thesis too.⁶ One might see in a thesis of this sort a direct argument for pragmatic encroachment, but given the foregoing it should be clear that this conclusion is at least resistible. As Engel himself puts the point, this conception of the relationship between knowledge and action:

“[...] does not in any way show that there is pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, for it is quite open to someone to hold that knowledge is relevant to the explanation of action while denying that whether one knows that *p* turns on practical matters.” (Engel 2009, 201)

I think that this is absolutely right.

Suppose, however, that we set aside the further claim about pragmatic encroachment and instead focus on the point about knowledge playing a fundamental role in action. Indeed, let us grant this point for the sake of argument. Ought it not to have axiological consequences for one's thinking about knowledge? That is, shouldn't it follow from this thesis that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief on account of the fact that only the former plays a fundamental role in action? Engel is, however, quite explicit that one can't derive a claim about the greater value of knowledge over mere true belief by appeal to these factors. He writes:

“[I]s knowledge more valuable than any of its subparts? We would have the beginning of such an answer if it could be shown, for instance in the reliabilist way, that knowledge is apt to produce more true beliefs than sheer luck or absence of method, or if the way in which knowledge matters could be associated to some specific dispositions of knowers, as virtue epistemology proposes. But the fact that our judgements about knowledge are relevant to our evaluation of actions, or that they are relevant for practical reasons, to repeat, shows nothing.” (Engel 2009, 201)

I find this rather mysterious. Why do such ‘facts’ about the relationship between knowledge and action “show nothing” about the value of knowledge? Indeed, to put this point into sharper relief, why is that the kind of epistemological ‘facts’ that are attributed to reliabilists and virtue epistemologists here *can* confer value on knowledge but these other facts about the practical import of knowledge in action cannot?

I think the answer lies in a failure to recognise a crucial ambiguity in the very notion of epistemic value. With this ambiguity made clear, we can allow that there is a perfectly legitimate sense in which pragmatic factors, such as concerning the relationship between knowledge and action, can contribute to the value of knowledge. Moreover, the way in which they make this contribution offers no basis at all for endorsing pragmatic encroachment about knowledge.

3. EPISTEMIC VALUE AND THE VALUE OF THE EPISTEMIC

The ambiguity I have in mind can be brought out by considering a distinction that Peter Geach (1956) draws between ‘predicative’ and ‘attributive’ expressions. Consider the following two expressions:

- (1) X is a red fly.
- (2) X is a big fly.

According to Geach, (1) is a predicative expression while (2) is an attributive expression. What he means by this is that while we can re-phrase (1) as the claim that X is both red and a fly, it would be a mistake to rephrase (2) as the claim that X is both big and a fly. After all, the claim at issue in (2) is precisely that X is big *for a fly*.

In the same way, we can distinguish between a predicative and an attributive version of claims about epistemic value. On a predicative reading, this means that we are dealing with something which is both epistemic and of value. On an attributive reading, in contrast, this means that we are dealing with something which is valuable in a specific way—*viz.*, that it is of specifically epistemic value. These are clearly distinct claims, as we will see. Henceforth, when we talk of ‘epistemic value’ we will mean a particular kind of value (i.e., we will presuppose the attributive reading), and we will refer to the predicative reading of ‘epistemic value’ by talking instead about ‘the value of the epistemic’. With this in mind, let us now see how epistemic value comes apart from the value of the epistemic.

That something is epistemically valuable does not in itself mean that it is valuable *simpliciter*,

any more than a big fly is thereby big *simpliciter*. Of course, it may be that there are bridging claims that one can bring to bear in this regard that make the necessary connection. Perhaps the epistemic axiological realm is such that it generates a kind of value which would sustain the predicative reading. There are precedents for this after all. For example, it is plausible that ethical value is both a kind of value and also value *simpliciter*—i.e., from the fact that something is ethically good one can plausibly infer that it is good *simpliciter*. Equally, however, there are also domains where this inference would be illegitimate. For example, that something is practically good does not mean that it is good *simpliciter*. In any case, absent a case being made for the relevant bridging claims, one cannot derive the value of the epistemic from epistemic value.

There is a similar distinction to be drawn in the opposite direction, from the value of the epistemic to epistemic value. Indeed, arguably the point here is even more straightforward: that an epistemic standing is valuable does not entail that it is of specifically *epistemic* value, since the value in question could be wholly non-epistemic (such as practical value, ethical value, aesthetic value, and so on). As before, some sort of bridging claim would be required to make the relevant transition, though here it is not particularly obvious how such a claim would be motivated. Why should the value of an epistemic standing entail epistemic value specifically?

Once this distinction between epistemic value and the value of the epistemic is made clear, then I think we are in a position to understand why Engel's response to pragmatic factors having a bearing on the value of knowledge is too strong. In particular, there is nothing to prevent us from admitting that pragmatic factors, such as the relationship between knowledge and action, can add value to knowledge just so long as we are clear that when we talk of 'epistemic value' here we have in mind the predicative reading of this expression (i.e., the value of the epistemic, as we have characterised it above). That is, all we are saying is that knowledge has a value in virtue of these pragmatic factors that lesser epistemic standings, such as mere true belief, lack. But this value is not a specifically epistemic kind of value; indeed, it is, presumably, just the practical kind of value that it appears to be.

Engel is, however, quite right to resist the thought that these pragmatic factors generate specifically *epistemic value*. This would indeed be highly controversial and would imply that pragmatic encroachment about knowledge is true.⁷ But in saying that knowledge has value in virtue of practical factors we are not making a claim about epistemic value at all.

Moreover, we can now explain why Engel maintains that reliabilism and virtue epistemology are able to offer accounts of knowledge which can explain (in contrast to appeals to the practical value of knowledge) the greater value of knowledge over its subparts. Since these are accounts of the value of knowledge which appeal to the nature of knowledge (i.e., its essential epistemic properties), I take it that Engel is quite naturally understanding them as making a claim

which is specifically about the epistemic value of knowledge. In contrast, since appeals to the practical value of knowledge are not appealing to the nature of knowledge—particularly once it is granted that pragmatic encroachment about knowledge is false—such a proposal will not have a bearing on the value of knowledge in this sense.

Let us grant that this is the correct way to unpack Engel's reasoning in this regard. We might now ask: is Engel *right* to reason in this way? I think not. With our distinction between epistemic value and the value of the epistemic in hand, it ought to be clear that in offering an account of knowledge which explains its value one is not thereby committing oneself to making a claim about the epistemic value of knowledge. In particular, it is at least an option that one's theory of knowledge explains the greater value of knowledge over its sub-parts by arguing that this value is exclusively non-epistemic. Indeed, I think that recognising this point is crucial to charting a way through the debate about the value of knowledge.

Consider the so-called 'swamping problem', for example, which is often alleged to show that knowledge cannot be more valuable than mere true belief.⁸ Very roughly, this problem asks how knowledge can be more valuable than mere true belief given that we evaluate epistemic standings instrumentally in terms of their propensity to promote true belief. Just as a cup of coffee created by a 'good' (from a coffee-making point of view) coffee-making machine is no more valuable than an identical cup of coffee produced by a 'bad' (from a coffee-making point of view) coffee-making machine, why should we care whether a true belief is accompanied by an epistemic standing which is the mark of it being acquired via an epistemically good process?⁹

In fact, properly understood, this problem at most only demonstrates that on a particular veritistic conception of epistemic value—whereby the fundamental epistemic good is true belief—knowledge is not of greater *epistemic* value than mere true belief.¹⁰ But that conclusion is compatible with the idea that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief (i.e., where the additional value is of a non-epistemic variety). Accordingly, even if, for example, the reliabilist is committed to the relevant veritistic claim about epistemic value, they can still potentially tell a story about how the nature of knowledge is such that its epistemic properties ensure that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.¹¹ Perhaps knowledge is of greater value than mere true belief because of the greater practical value of reliably formed belief, for example?¹² It follows that one can explain the value of knowledge by appeal to the nature of knowledge without thereby making any claim about the greater epistemic value of knowledge over lesser epistemic standings.¹³

There could be another thought underlying Engel's reasoning here though. For one might think that there is something essentially contingent about explaining the value of knowledge by

appeal to practical value, in contrast to explaining the value of knowledge by appeal to its essential epistemic properties. One can see the attraction of this idea. Whether or not knowledge has practical value will very much depend on the particular conditions in which it is possessed. In contrast, if one is appealing to the essential epistemic properties of knowledge in order to explain its value, then one is showing that it has this value regardless of the particular conditions under which this knowledge possessed. Despite the attraction of this idea, however, I think it should be resisted.

To begin with, we need to think a bit more about what it is we are trying to show when we say that knowledge is valuable. There are stronger and weaker theses that we might have in mind, along at least three axes. One axis, which we've just noted, concerns epistemic value *versus* the value of the epistemic. The claim that knowledge is valuable in both these senses (i.e., both epistemically valuable and valuable *simpliciter*) is on the face of it stronger than the claim that it is valuable in just one of these senses (e.g., just epistemically valuable). A second axis concerns the relevant contrast. Is the claim that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, or more valuable than its sub-parts, or more valuable in comparison to something else entirely?¹⁴ A third axis concerns the strength of the claim that knowledge is valuable. On a very strong reading this could mean that it necessarily always of value. But weaker readings seem available too. Suppose it were true that knowledge is generally the kind of thing that is of value to creatures like us (i.e., creatures in the sort of conditions that we tend to find ourselves in). Wouldn't that suffice to show that knowledge is valuable?¹⁵

This third axis is particularly relevant to our current purposes. If one thinks that the intuition that knowledge is valuable is to be understood as the claim that knowledge is generally the kind of thing that is of valuable to us, then there need be no particular bar to supposing that contingent facts about knowledge—such that it generally has a certain practical utility—could underwrite its value.

Moreover, notice that even where one is appealing to essential features of knowledge to explain its value, it still doesn't follow that one is thereby undertaking the project of showing that knowledge is necessarily always of value. Reliabilism is a case in point in this regard. We noted earlier that it is open to the reliabilist to maintain that the explanation for why knowledge is more valuable than its sub-parts is that an essential epistemic property of knowledge—that it is true belief reliably gained—has practical value. But that's entirely consistent with the thought that such practical value is contingent on the nature of the circumstances that one has the knowledge in question.

The upshot is that theories of knowledge like reliabilism or virtue epistemology are not

better placed to account for the value of knowledge than pragmatic accounts of the value of knowledge. The only difference in play here is that the former can explain the value of knowledge in terms of the essential epistemic properties of knowledge (something which is not available to the latter since it is not an account of knowledge). As we have seen, however, even that point is consistent with their explanation of the value of knowledge being in terms of non-epistemic value.

We are thus back to our original contention, which is that there is nothing inherently dubious about the idea that the value of knowledge might be attributable to purely pragmatic factors. As we have seen, one can accept this claim without conceding anything at all to pragmatic encroachment about knowledge.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although I have here been critiquing something that Engel has argued, I hope it is also clear that this line of critique is one which is very sympathetic to Engel's general approach in this regard. What I have been arguing, after all, is that we can reject pragmatic encroachment about knowledge while nonetheless accepting that the kind of practical considerations which the proponents of pragmatic encroachment appeal to can have a role to play in explaining the value of knowledge. If anything, this is yet another count against pragmatic encroachment about knowledge, since in denying this thesis we are not led into making claims about the value of knowledge that are otherwise contentious. In this sense, then, these critical remarks are in the spirit of Engel and myself being comrades against pragmatic encroachment in epistemology.¹⁶

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NOTES

¹ In the interests of maintaining at least the appearance of scholarship, I will henceforth refer to Pascal as ‘Engel’.

² I am here focusing on pragmatic encroachment about knowledge, specifically, though of course there are versions of the pragmatic encroachment thesis which apply to other epistemic standings.

³ For the main defences of pragmatic encroachment, see Fantl & McGrath (2002; 2007; 2009), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2005). For a helpful survey of recent work on pragmatic encroachment, see Fantl & McGrath (2010).

⁴ I discuss such conversational effects on knowledge ascriptions in Pritchard (2012*b*, part 3).

⁵ See also Pritchard (2007*a*) for a different kind of response to the lottery-style cases that Hawthorne (2004) employs to motivate a version of pragmatic encroachment.

⁶ See, for example, Engel (2009, 199). For some of the main defences of this general view about the relationship between knowledge and action, see Williamson (2000), Fantl & McGrath (2002), Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (2005), and Hawthorne & Stanley (2008).

⁷ Actually, I think that rather than lending support for pragmatic encroachment about knowledge, this claim would simply be incoherent. For pragmatic encroachment to even make sense we need a fairly clear sense of the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic (e.g., practical) factors. If practical factors are now allowed to generate a specifically epistemic kind of value, then in what sense is this still pragmatic encroachment at all? Haven’t we instead just extended the realm of epistemic to take in factors hitherto considered non-epistemic? This is not to say that such a view is unavailable, only that it is not best thought of in terms of pragmatic encroachment but as a different claim entirely.

⁸ For more on the swamping problem, see Jones (1997), Swinburne (1999), Kvanvig (2003), and Zagzebski (2003). See also Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 1) and Pritchard (2011).

⁹ The coffee cup analogy is due to Zagzebski (2003).

¹⁰ The chief exponent of veritism is Goldman (1999; 2002), though a view of this sort is implicit in the work of a lot of key contemporary epistemologists. For further discussion of veritism, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

¹¹ For more on this point, see Pritchard (2011; *forthcomingb*).

¹² Indeed, I think that the best responses that reliabilists offer to the question of the value of knowledge are essentially of this form (though to my knowledge they do not register the distinction between epistemic value and the value of the epistemic that I mark here). See Olsson (2007; 2009) and Goldman & Olsson (2009). For further discussion of reliabilism in this regard, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

Note that the possibility that one’s theory of knowledge can explain the value of knowledge by appealing to non-epistemic value is even clearer in the case of virtue epistemology. This is because of the general plausibility of the idea that intellectual virtues have broadly ethical value. Thus it could follow from the nature of knowledge that knowledge is of greater value than its sub-parts in virtue of its greater ethical value, even though it is conceded that knowledge is not of greater epistemic value than its sub-parts. For more on virtue epistemology and the value of knowledge, see Pritchard (2009*a*; 2009*b*) and Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, chs. 1-4). See also Pritchard (2012*a*).

¹³ I think that understanding this point also helps us to see why the claim that truth is the fundamental epistemic good is not nearly as problematic as it is (these days anyway) typically supposed to be. For further discussion of this claim, see Pritchard (*forthcominga*).

¹⁴ Elsewhere—see Pritchard (2007*b*), Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 1), and Pritchard & Turri (2011)—I’ve referred to the value problem in terms of these first two contrasts as the “primary” and “secondary” value problems, respectively. See also endnote 15.

¹⁵ There are other axes along which to cast the question of the value of knowledge. For example, one issue we haven’t touched on here is whether knowledge has a distinctive kind of value that its sub-parts lack, such that the difference in value in play is not merely a difference of degree but of kind. (This is a problem that I’ve elsewhere called the “tertiary” value problem—see Pritchard (2007*b*), Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 1), and Pritchard & Turri (2011)). Relatedly, one gets different versions of the value problem for knowledge by combining different axes: why is knowledge epistemically more valuable than mere true belief?; why is knowledge more valuable than its sub-parts?; and so on.

¹⁶ Acknowledgements.