

Allan Hazlett, *A Luxury of the Understanding: On the Value of True Belief*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xi + 302 pp.

We commonly think of true belief as something valuable. In his provocative and well-argued book, *A Luxury of the Understanding: On the Value of True Belief*, Allan Hazlett calls this idea into question. It might just be that “there is nothing more to the value of true belief than the fact that some people, contingently, care about, or love, or value, true belief” (274). This suggestion jibes with his defense of a form of *antirealism* about epistemic value, on which, whatever it is that makes the epistemic evaluation of belief appropriate, it’s not the existence of epistemic value, as something over and above some people valuing things traditionally referred to as epistemic.

How does he get there? Hazlett’s book is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with the idea that true belief is *eudaimonically* valuable, or in some way intimately connected with well-being or flourishing. Hazlett sees two problems with this idea. The first is that empirical psychology shows us that there is a “clearly identifiable pattern of cases in which false belief is better for a person than true belief” (63), on account of our tendencies toward biased self-conceptions. Specifically, self-serving illusions promote nondepression and self-esteem, which in turn are conducive to subjective well-being and the ability to cope. The second problem is that friendship and moral virtue—both constituents of a good life, according to Hazlett—require the manifestation of some specific cognitive biases, in turn issuing in false belief. As for friendship, it rests on a *partiality bias*, which has us engage in a form of wishful thinking about our friends for purposes of maintaining a high regard for them. Moral virtue, in turn, requires a *charitable bias*, manifesting itself in positive illusions about people in general.

So much for the idea of true belief’s eudaimonic value. Of course, epistemologists might at this point be perfectly unperturbed. In contemporary epistemology, claims about the value of true belief are typically framed in terms of the *epistemic* value of true belief, as distinct from eudaimonic, prudential, moral, and other types of value. But here, too, Hazlett is skeptical, for reasons laid out in the second part of the book. He frames the discussion in terms of epistemologists at a minimum needing to answer what he calls the *basic question* about why the epistemic evaluation of belief is at all appropriate. The answers he considers are all versions of *realism* about epistemic value, on which “[t]he appropriateness of epistemic evaluation is explained by the existence of epistemic value” (138), where such value arises on account of true belief being an ‘aim of belief’.

More specifically, Hazlett discusses—and ultimately rejects—three incarnations of the idea of an ‘aim of belief’. First, the Humean answer is that epistemic evaluation is appropriate, and true belief good, because beliefs are essentially attempts to believe what’s true. The problem here, Hazlett argues, is

that the Humean must either deny that all beliefs are potential targets for epistemic evaluation, or else maintain that all beliefs are accompanied by a desire that they be true—and neither is acceptable, he argues. Second, the Darwinian answer to the basic question is that the biological function of belief is to represent the world accurately. The problem is that this doesn't get us any type of normativity. Something can function properly, in an evolutionary sense, without it being the case that to function in that manner is good. Third, the Kantian answer is that it's simply a conceptual truth that beliefs are good or correct if and only if true—an answer that violates plausible naturalistic constraints, on account of needing to postulate an irreducible form of normativity.

Where does this leave us? According to Hazlett, with a form of anti-realism about epistemic value, as suggested already at the outset. More specifically, Hazlett doesn't deny that there are epistemic values; he simply thinks that the appropriate attitude toward their existence should be some form of skepticism. Moreover, such skepticism is compatible with motivating the epistemic evaluation of belief with reference to "the social value of that practice" on account of how "the collective practice of epistemic evaluation is a means to the collective good of acquiring instrumentally valuable true beliefs, and avoiding false beliefs, about important topics" (248). In other words, some true beliefs are valuable on account of what they get us in terms of goods other than true belief, and that's why epistemic evaluation is (sometimes) worthwhile.

This concludes my brief overview of the book. Before turning to some critical comments, let me make something clear. This is an excellent book. It brings a wealth of philosophical and empirical material to bear on what is arguably the most central question in epistemology—*What, if anything, is good about believing truly?*—and in so doing delivers a bold and well-supported line of argument that strikes at the very heart of assumptions shared by many epistemologists who otherwise agree on little. Hazlett has done discussions on these matters a great service, and anyone seriously interested in the value of truth needs to contend with what he has to say.

That said, I have two worries about the positive proposal Hazlett puts forward about the appropriateness of epistemic evaluation. Borrowing a notion from Ernest Sosa, Hazlett endorses the idea that evaluative practices—be it about coffee, archery, bowling, or true belief—take place within "critical domains," which consist in sets of practices and values by way of which these practices can be evaluated. According to Hazlett, "we might understand epistemology as a critical domain of this kind, organized around the fundamental standard of true belief" (256). This is compatible with there being nothing *special* about epistemic evaluation, compared to any other type of evaluation one could engage in. Granted, it has a fundamental standard, namely true belief, but Hazlett makes clear that, in this case, "this, rather than that, [being] a fundamental standard comes down to nothing more than what we

mean by ‘epistemic.’ And in the case of ‘epistemic,’ this is a term of art employed by epistemologists” (257).

My first worry is that the combination of these two ideas—that evaluative practices are nothing but critical domains and that epistemic evaluation is the critical domain revolving around the terms of art of epistemologists—renders epistemic evaluation a parochial and on that account normatively toothless exercise. Because if there is nothing special or otherwise privileged about that domain, why think that people in general will have any reason to buy into it? Hazlett offers a partial answer by appealing to Bernard Williams’ idea of blame as a “proleptic mechanism.” But as Williams makes clear, such a mechanism operates on the fact that people *respect* those doing the blaming, and thereby care about their disapproval. It’s not clear how this is supposed to work in the epistemic domain, however, if epistemic evaluation is nothing but the application of technical terms of art by epistemologists. It would require that people care deeply about what epistemologists think of them—and I doubt that’s a substantive consideration in the minds of very many when considering how to go about their business.

Of course, we might feel that people *should* care about what epistemologists think about them. But it’s not clear that Hazlett gets to say that. If there’s nothing more to the value of truth than that some of us value believing truly, then people should arguably only care about the epistemologist’s judgments in so far as they share her love for true belief. But, throughout his book, Hazlett seems to suggest that a love of truth is unique to the philosopher. For example, early on in the book (such as on pages 23–25 and 33), he rejects principles of curiosity implying that everyone wants to know. Moreover, having suggested that there’s nothing more to the value of truth than that some value true belief, he declares that “[p]hilosophers are lovers of truth” (274), and that philosophers in that respect are to be distinguished from “‘the common run of people,’ who do not allow their reason to much influence their beliefs” (276). This makes it very difficult to see what claim the epistemologist really is supposed to have on people in general, given the parochial nature of the goals with reference to which her evaluations operate on Hazlett’s picture.

Now, Hazlett might object that he hasn’t denied that true belief is at least sometimes instrumentally valuable even for people who might not share the philosopher’s love for truth—and maybe people generally, at least in some cases, thereby have reason to pay heed to what epistemologists are saying. But this brings me to my second worry: epistemologists simply are not engaged in epistemic evaluation, as Hazlett understands it. Epistemic evaluation is the practice of sorting good from bad beliefs, for purposes of saying something about what we *should* believe. But that’s not what the great majority of epistemologists are doing; they’re engaged in a practice that’s better described as conceptual analysis, as opposed to anything resembling epistemic prescription. Of course, some epistemologists (such as Alvin Goldman, Philip Kitcher, Michael Bishop

and J. D. Trout) *do* believe that epistemology should be ‘regulative’ or ‘ameliorative’—but they’re in the minority, and do not figure (in that capacity) in Hazlett’s book. So, either Hazlett thinks that epistemology is in bad need of reorientation, but has given us nothing by way of a story about how that’s supposed to happen, or he thinks that epistemic evaluation is nothing but an attempt to conceptually clarify central epistemic notions. But he can’t think the latter, since it’s far from clear that ‘epistemic evaluation’, so understood, generates the type of social value he wants to suggest makes such evaluation at all appropriate.

What this means is that, even if Hazlett found a way around the worry that epistemic evaluation on his view comes out a parochial and normatively toothless enterprise, his antirealist defense of the appropriateness of such evaluation still seems to commit him to a fairly radical reorientation of epistemology, into a field that actually offers regulative advice on a wide scale. While that suggests that he owes us far more by way of a positive account of epistemic evaluation than what is offered in the book, it is in one respect also good news for him. After all, one of the main worries about the type of antirealism he defends is that in the absence of the type of strong normative force we get on the realist picture, epistemology might lose its relevancy. Not so if the above line of reasoning is correct. If anything, it suggests that there’s plenty of work to do, not just for Hazlett himself, but for epistemologists generally.

Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij

Birkbeck College, University of London

Philosophical Review, Vol. 127, No. 2, 2018

DOI 10.1215/00318108-4326647

Randall E. Auxier, Douglas R. Anderson, and Lewis Edwin Hahn, eds., *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*. The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 34. Chicago: Open Court, 2015. xxvi + 948 pp.

The Library of Living Philosophers volumes are always a treat and this one is no exception—complete with a substantial autobiography, twenty-six critical essays, in-depth responses, a detailed index, and an exhaustive bibliography of Putnam’s work (by John Shook). It has been long in the making, some contributions dating back to 2002.

Hilary Putnam (1926–2016) has left many lasting marks. The editors of this volume have done an admirable job of providing a broad and well-balanced