***A Luxury of the Understanding: On the Value of True Belief***, by Allan Hazlett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 302. H/b £48.00.

A widespread and long-standing assumption among philosophers in general, and epistemologists in particular, is that true belief is valuable. In this ambitious and wide-ranging book, Allan Hazlett sets out to challenge this assumption. In doing so, he subjects it to careful scrutiny.

The opening chapter aims primarily to distinguish different ways of interpreting the claim that it is good to believe what is true – one might understand it to mean that true belief is normally good, or pro tanto good (in some respect), or instrumentally good (as a means to securing other goods), or finally good (for its own sake), or constitutively good (as part of a valuable whole), or intrinsically good (in virtue of its intrinsic properties), and so on. Perhaps the most important distinction – one which structures the rest of the book – is between claiming that true belief is a eudaimonic good, that is, good with respect to a person’s well-being, and claiming that it is an epistemic good.

It can feel overwhelming as these competing interpretations pile up, but Hazlett’s efforts on this front add up to one of the book’s main contributions. In recent debates concerning the suggestion that true belief is valuable there is a tendency not to register the different ways it might be understood, to make explicit the intended meaning, and to distinguish it from others. As a result, it is sometimes hard to assess the relevant arguments and parties to the debate often appear to talk past one another. Hazlett’s opening chapter offers a welcome corrective to this and should provide a useful reference point for future discussion.

With the groundwork laid, the book divides in two. In Part I, Hazlett assesses the claim that it is normally good for a person’s well-being to believe the truth. He argues that certain false beliefs contribute to well-being, and in a systematic fashion. In support of this (ch. 2), Hazlett appeals to self-enhancement bias – the disposition to overestimate one’s traits, abilities, and characteristics. The false beliefs that result from this promote well-being by fostering feelings of self-worth, motivating one to persist in one’s endeavours, and enabling one to cope with life’s challenges, while a more accurate self-conception might have the opposite, detrimental effect.

In a similar fashion (ch. 3), Hazlett argues that partiality bias – a tendency to evaluative positively one’s friends – is partially constitutive of friendship. Insofar as friendship contributes to well-being, the false beliefs which result from such bias promote well-being, while more accurate estimations of one’s friends might detract from it.

After denying that true belief is normally good vis-a-vis well-being, Hazlett considers and rejects related proposals, such as that true belief has pro tanto eudaimonic value, or value as a means to well-being, or as a constitutive part of it (ch. 3).

The arguments of Part I draw extensively but not uncritically on research in social psychology. Indeed, one of the impressive features of the book more generally is the range of perspectives, historical and contemporary, which Hazlett draws on, both in an interdisciplinary fashion, as above, and in what one might call an intersubdisciplinary fashion, engaging with, not just epistemology, but ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and other fields.

In Part II, Hazlett turns his attention to the idea that true belief is epistemically valuable. The guiding question is not whether that idea is true – he accepts that it is – but what explains our practices of epistemic evaluation. According to realism, as Hazlett defines it (p. 138), to account for the appropriateness of attributions of epistemic value, such as that true belief is epistemically good, we need to appeal to epistemic values. According to the anti-realist, we do not need to do this. Hazlett defends a version of anti-realism but first he considers and rejects three ‘realist’ alternatives.

The first is the ‘Humean’ view (ch. 6), according to which, very roughly, it is good to do what satisfies one’s desires and believing a proposition involves desiring to do so only if it is true. From these claims, it follows that it is good when a person believes a truth. By appeal to the Humean view, one might try to explain the appropriateness of epistemic evaluation.

It is not clear that the Humean is, as Hazlett suggests (p. 154), a realist, at least as he characterises realism. The value the Humean appeals to in vindicating the practice of epistemic evaluation is not obviously epistemic; it is the same sort of value which is realised when my desire for Mexican food is satisfied by a burrito.

In any event, Hazlett rejects the Humean approach on the grounds that it is possible to believe a proposition while lacking the relevant desire. In support of this, he appeals to ‘unrefined thinkers’, like infants, who ‘are capable of belief but not capable of higher-order desires about their beliefs’ (p. 166). A familiar move in response to cases of this sort is simply to deny that such ‘thinkers’ are believers. More carefully, such creatures might have proto-beliefs or belief-like states but they lack beliefs of the sort which mature human adults enjoy and, importantly, which are subject to epistemic evaluation. I am not suggesting that this move is successful but it would have been worth considering it.

Hazlett also appeals to cases of ‘unconscious belief formation’, such as those in which a person acquires a perceptual belief while focusing on other matters (p. 167). In response, the Humean might claim that, in such cases, the relevant desire is present, albeit unconsciously. One might ask what evidence there is that unconscious desires accompany unconscious beliefs. My unconscious desire to impress my colleague might show up in the way I respond to evidence of her estimation of me, for example, by being moved to retract a claim when a frown suggests it strikes her as naive. Likewise, my unconscious desire to believe a proposition only if it is true might show up in the way I respond to evidence of its falsity, say, by abandoning that belief.

Hazlett does consider the appeal, on behalf of the Humean, to unconscious desires or intentions. He writes:

Intentions, like beliefs and desires, need not be conscious. My argument was that higher-order thoughts, conscious or unconscious, about our beliefs, are rare in adult humans and absent entirely in children and non-humans. (p. 170)

The case for thinking that children and non-humans lack higher-order desires and intentions concerning their beliefs rests on the objection from unrefined thinkers, discussed above. The case for thinking that adult humans rarely have such higher-order attitudes rests on the objection from unconscious belief formation. But the appeal to unconscious desires and intentions is a response to that objection. So, Hazlett cannot respond in turn by appeal to that objection.

While Hazlett’s arguments against the Humean view are not decisive as they stand, he does raise important challenges to it, challenges which the Humean needs to address.

Hazlett turns next to the ‘Darwinian’ view (ch. 7), according to which, very roughly, it is good when something performs its biological function, and the biological function of belief is to be true. From these claims, it follows that it is good when a person believes a truth. By appeal to the Darwinian view, one might try to explain the appropriateness of epistemic evaluation.

Again, it is not obvious that the Darwinian counts as a realist by Hazlett’s lights. In any event, he rejects both the Darwinian claims. Regarding the first, Hazlett writes:

A single-celled protist divides; a fungus releases a puff of spores, a sea cucumber excretes a cloud of waste. Are all these events good, in virtue of being instances of biological functioning? (p. 189)

Regarding the second claim, Hazlett insists that it is simply an open question, one which cannot be answered from the armchair, whether a function of belief is to represent the world accurately and, if it is, whether it has other functions which are, or need not be, served by being true.

Finally, Hazlett considers the ‘Kantian’ view (ch. 8), according to which, very roughly, it is a conceptual truth about the essential nature of belief that it is correct to believe a proposition if and only if it is true, and it is good to believe correctly. From these claims, it follows that it is good when a person believes a truth. By appeal to the Kantian view, one might try to explain the appropriateness of epistemic evaluation.

Hazlett makes two objections to the Kantian view. First, it is in tension with ‘naturalism’, according to which there are ‘no irreducible normative properties’ (p. 150). Second, the arguments which have been offered in support of the Kantian view are unsuccessful. I will focus here on the first point.

Why is the Kantian view in tension with naturalism? According to Hazlett, a proponent of that view ‘adopts a normative conception of belief’ and, as a result, holds that ‘the property of being a belief is a normative property’. This is inconsistent with naturalism, assuming ‘the normativity of belief is irreducible’ (p. 215).

While it is no doubt the case that many proponents of the Kantian view embrace this line of thought, some might reject it. On the one hand, a Kantian might maintain that the normative property of having a belief just is whatever natural property occupies the role governed by the relevant norms. This is the kind of position Frank Jackson seems to accept when he defends ‘the normativity of belief’ while maintaining ‘that *all* normative terms can be reductively analysed’ (1999, p. 433).

On the other hand, a Kantian might deny that having a belief is a normative property. While the standard of correctness for belief holds in virtue of its essential nature, perhaps that standard is a consequence of the essence of belief, not constitutive of it (see, for example, Zangwill 2010).

Of course, it remains to be seen whether either of these positions is tenable. The point for now is just that the Kantian, as such, is neutral with respect to whether having a belief is a normative property and, if it is, with respect to whether that property is reducible. Thus, it is an open question whether the Kantian view is in tension with naturalism.

Turning now to Hazlett’s own position (ch. 9), he defends the anti-realist view that one can explain the appropriateness of epistemic evaluation without appeal to epistemic values. He suggests that the practice of epistemic assessment can be justified by its social value; it is ‘a means to the collective [non-epistemic] good of acquiring instrumentally valuable true beliefs, and avoiding false beliefs, about important topics’ (p. 248). Moreover, Hazlett claims that for a belief to be epistemically good is just for it to conform to the conventions which govern the epistemic domain, in much the same way as a good after-dinner speaker is simply one who conforms to the conventions which govern formal dining.

Overall, the book is a spirited and informed exploration of the various ways in which true belief might be thought to be good. Hazlett presents a serious challenge to the idea that there is a significant connection between believing the truth and living well. In addition, he raises important questions concerning the status of epistemic discourse and its subject matter. This book deserves the attention of those working in epistemology and related fields.

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**References**

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