We are familiar with the idea that belief sometimes amounts to knowledge – i.e. that there are instances of belief that are also instances of knowledge. Here I defend an unfamiliar idea: that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge – i.e. that there are instances of desire that are also instances of knowledge. My argument rests on two premises. First, I assume that goodness is the correctness condition for desire. Second, I assume a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge, on which knowledge is apt mental representation. With those assumptions made, I’ll argue that desires can amount to instances of apt representation, and thus to knowledge.

I will call cases of desire that amounts to knowledge cases of conative knowledge, by contrast with familiar cases of belief that amounts to knowledge. My thesis, then, is that there is such a thing as conative knowledge.

My argument in this paper relies on two substantial assumptions about desire and knowledge. I explain what motivates these assumptions for those attracted to them, but I defend neither at length. However, even for those not attracted to these assumptions, there is something interesting to learn here: that if these two relatively common assumptions are true, then desire sometimes amounts to knowledge. If you agree that goodness is the correctness condition for desire, you may wish to cast the conclusion that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge as an unhappy consequence of virtue-theoretic accounts of knowledge; if you endorse a virtue-theoretic account of knowledge, you may wish to cast the conclusion that desire sometimes amounts to knowledge as an unhappy consequence of the claim that goodness is the correctness condition for desire.

The history of philosophical ethics is often animated by a clash between two ideas. On the one hand, there is a Platonic insight that the good life requires knowledge of goodness – since you will not easily realize goodness in your life without such knowledge. On the other hand, there is a Pyrrhonian insight that the good life does not require beliefs about goodness – since people can easily live well while avoiding ethical theorizing altogether. Debates between Stoics and skeptics, between rationalists and sentimentalists, and between cognitivists and non-cognitivists are all variants on this clash. The conclusion that there is such a thing as conative knowledge puts us in a position from which we can reconcile these ideas. For conative knowledge is a species of knowledge of goodness. We are thus free to maintain both that the good life requires knowledge of goodness and that the good life does not require beliefs about goodness.

In what follows I will articulate the premise that goodness is the correctness condition for desire (§1) and the premise that knowledge is apt mental representation (§2). I will then argue that there is such a thing as conative knowledge (§3), and conclude the discussion (§4).

1 Goodness as the correctness condition for desire

My first premise is that goodness is the correctness condition for desire. What does this mean?

1.1 Anscombe’s assumption and truth as the correctness condition for belief

The leading idea here is articulated by G.E.M. Anscombe (1963) in the following passage:
The conceptual connection between ‘wanting’ … and ‘good’ can be compared to the conceptual connection between ‘judgment’ and ‘truth’. Truth is the object of judgment, and good the object of wanting. (p. 76)¹

Swapping desire for ‘wanting’ and belief for ‘judgment’, here is the idea:

**Anscombe’s assumption:** the conceptual connection between desire and goodness is the same as the conceptual connection between belief and truth.

But what is “the conceptual connection between belief and truth”? Here I take this to amount to the following: truth is the correctness condition for belief. Belief is a species of representation that can be correct or incorrect.² And the following is an uncontroversial account of the condition under which beliefs are correct or incorrect:

**Truth is the correctness condition for belief (TCB):** It is correct to believe that p if and only if it is true that p (and it is incorrect to believe that p if and only if it is false that p).³

We could just as well say: a belief, whose content is the proposition that p, is correct if and only if it is true that p. However, although TCB is plausibly a conceptual truth, we need not assume that TCB exhausts the nature or essence of belief – in other words, we need not assume that TCB amounts to an account of belief.

In what sense are true beliefs “correct” and false beliefs “incorrect”? We mean here *representational correctness*, i.e. the property had by representations when they are accurate or right, by contrast with *representational incorrectness*, i.e. that had when they are inaccurate, wrong, mistaken, or in error.

Note that representational correctness and incorrectness are not prescriptive concepts. What I mean, in the case of belief, is that there are cases in which it is not the case that you ought to believe that p even though it is correct to believe that p (e.g. when you have no evidence that p) and cases in which you ought to believe that p even though it is incorrect to believe that p (e.g. when you have misleading evidence that p). That all and only true beliefs are correct does not imply that you ought to believe all and only truths. For this reason, TCB does not provide an account of rational belief, reasonable belief, justified belief, warranted belief, and so on.

1.2 The premise

² In the sense that belief is the type of thing that can be correct or incorrect, even if there are token beliefs that cannot be correct (e.g. beliefs in necessary falsehoods) or that cannot be incorrect (e.g. beliefs in necessary truths). This is what we mean when we say that truth is the “aim of belief.” This metaphor is uncontroversial, although the explanation of TCB isn’t. Our options are roughly three: appeal to the constitutive normativity of belief (e.g. Shah 2003), appeal to the constitutive teleology of belief (e.g. Steglich-Petersen 2006), or give a naturalistic reduction of correctness in functional terms (e.g. Papineau 2013). Much depends on whether we are cognitivists about belief attribution; the constitutive normativity of belief is easier for naturalists to swallow if they are non-cognitivists about belief attribution (cf. Dennett 1971, pp. 102-3, Shah and Velleman 2005, pp. 508-11).
From TCB and Anscombe’s assumption, we can infer, first, that desire is, like belief, a species of representation that can be correct or incorrect, and, second, that goodness is the correctness condition for desire:

**Goodness is the correctness condition for desire (GCD):** It is correct to desire \( x \) if and only if \( x \) is good (and incorrect to desire \( x \) if and only if \( x \) is bad).\(^4\)

We could just as well say: a desire, whose content is \( x \), is correct if and only if \( x \) is good. Desire “aims at goodness” in the same sense that belief “aims at truth,” and desires are representations of goodness in the same way that beliefs are representations of truth. Again, although GCD is plausibly a conceptual truth, we need not assume that GCD exhausts the nature or essence of desire.

As with TCB, “correct” and “incorrect” refer to representational correctness and incorrectness here. GCD is thus not an account of obligatory desire, permissible desire, rational desire, reasonable desire, virtuous desire, and so on. There is also a sense of “correct” and “incorrect” on which to say that a desire is correct is just to say that it is satisfied and to say that a desire is incorrect is just to say that it is unsatisfied. (This sense jibes with the sense in which all desires “aim” at their own satisfaction.) This is obviously not the sense of “correct” and “incorrect” being used here.

The content of a desire, \( x \), might be a proposition, or (if this amounts to something substantially different) an event or state of affairs. When we speak of desiring an individual, like a steak tartare, it is natural to think that a more perspicuous articulation of our desire would explicate its content as a proposition, event, or state of affairs, e.g. the centered proposition that I in the near future eat a steak tartare.\(^5\)

What is it for something – a proposition, say – to be good? A deep question, surely, or at least one no less deep than the question, which we might ask in connection with TCB, of what it is for a proposition to be true. However, I do not think the defender of GCD is on the hook to give an account of goodness, any more than the defender of TCB is on the hook to give an account of truth. Of course, there are accounts of goodness that would render GCD implausible. For example, if you said that \( x \) is good if and only \( x \) is desired by someone, then GCD would be implausible, because desire’s correctness condition would be trivially satisfied. (In the same way, if you said that \( x \) is true if and only if \( x \) is desired by someone, then GCB would be implausible, because belief’s correctness condition would be trivially satisfied.) For another example, according to the “fitting attitudes” or “dispositional” account of value, goodness is explained in terms of the fittingness of desiring it. Now, at first glance this seems to be perfectly compatible with GCD. But GCD needs to be interpreted not just as a necessary biconditional, but as an account of the correctness of desires, such that the correctness of desires is explained in terms of their goodness. Thus, the explanatory claim implied by the “fitting attitudes” or “dispositional” account of value and the explanatory claim implied by GCD are incompatible – on the assumption that such explanations cannot be circular. (In the same way, if you gave an account of truth in terms of correct

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\(^4\) Does GCD contradict the idea that belief and desire differ in their “direction of fit”? The metaphorical claim that belief and desire differ in their “direction of fit” is ambiguous. It could mean that belief has a correctness condition and desire doesn’t; that is incompatible with GCD. Or it could mean that desires, but not beliefs, dispose us to try to actualize their contents; that is compatible with GCD.

\(^5\) It seems to me that the content of a desire is always a proposition, but sometimes a centered proposition. Note that “\( x \) is good” and “the goodness of \( x \)” are technical expressions, covering cases of false propositions, where we would normally say that it would be good were it the case that \( p \).
belief, as some anti-realists are inclined to do, it would be incoherent to accept TCB, which needs to be understand as an account of the correctness of beliefs.) In any event, in assuming GCD, I also assume the falsity of any account of goodness that is incompatible with GCD.

1.3 Motivation for GCD

I arrived at GCD by appeal to Anscombe’s assumption and TCB. But why accept these assumptions – and why accept Anscombe’s assumption, in particular? The principal reason comes from the fact that Anscombe’s assumption can explain what goes wrong in Hume’s argument that it would not be unreasonable to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of your finger. Hume’s argument is based on the premise that a “passion is an original existence … and contains not any representative quality” and that “our passions, volitions, and actions, are … original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions.” Passions, because they are impressions, and therefore not copies of anything, cannot be correct or incorrect. They are thus to be contrasted with beliefs, which are ideas, and therefore copies, and thus capable of being correct or incorrect, according to whether they faithfully represent that of which they are copies. Hume, for this reason, rejects Anscombe’s assumption, which leads straightaway to his conclusion that it would not be unreasonable to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of your finger. Defenders of Anscombe’s assumption are in a position to diagnose Hume’s error: passions are not original existences that imply no reference to anything; rather, like beliefs, they are representations can be correct or incorrect.

2 Knowledge as apt mental representation

My second premise is that knowledge is apt mental representation. What does this mean?

2.1 Propositional knowledge as apt belief

Consider a familiar virtue-theoretic account of propositional knowledge:

Virtue-theoretic account of propositional knowledge (VPK): Propositional knowledge is apt belief, i.e. you know that p if and only if your belief that p is apt, where your belief that p is apt if and only if it is true and its truth manifests one or more of your epistemic virtues, where epistemic virtues are reliable capacities to form true beliefs and to avoid forming false beliefs.9

Defenders of VPK are attracted to it for three reasons. First, VPK requires, for knowledge, the kind of link between the believer and the truth of their belief that is missing in cases of justified true belief that does not amount to knowledge, thereby improving on the tripartite analysis of knowledge. Second, VPK facilitates an elegant explanation of the value of knowledge, over and above the value of true belief, in

terms of achievement. Third, VPK provides a naturalistically kosher account of knowledge in terms of reliable capacities, without the use of unanalyzed normative notions of justification and evidence.

2.2 The premise

In the theory of knowledge, we standardly begin by distinguishing between several species of knowledge. There is propositional knowledge, i.e. knowledge that p. But there is also explanatory knowledge, i.e. knowledge why p; and there is also individual knowledge, as when you know some person, or place, or topic; and there is also practical knowledge, i.e. knowing how to φ. Moreover, today we also standardly note at some point that there are other mind-world relations of interest to epistemologists, such as understanding – which itself seems to admit of several species. All of these things – propositional knowledge, explanatory knowledge, individual knowledge, practical knowledge, understanding – seem to have something in common; they seem to be species of the same genus. My second premise is the following virtue theoretic account of that genus, which is a generalization of VPK:

**Virtue-theoretic account of knowledge (VK):** Knowledge is apt mental representation, i.e. a mental representation amounts to knowledge if and only if it is apt, where a mental representation is apt if and only if it is correct and its correctness manifests one or more representational virtues of the person who makes it, where a representational virtue is a reliable capacity to make correct representations and to avoid making incorrect representations.10

VK amends VPK in two key ways. First, it replaces belief, in particular, with mental representation, in general. Second, it replaces truth, understood as a property of beliefs, with representational correctness (cf. §1), understood as a property of mental representations.11 VPK thus leaves open the possibility of non-doxastic species of knowledge – instances of apt mental representation that are not instances of belief.

2.3 Motivation for VK

VK inherits the three attractive features of VPK mentioned above. However, VK’s most attractive feature is the fact that it provides a principled explanation of the unity of the various species of knowledge – in the present broad sense of “knowledge,” which includes understanding. Compare the idea that these are all “epistemic goods” and the idea that they are all species of “cognitive contact with reality,”12 neither of which provides us with any way of determining what is included in and what is excluded from the proposed category.

3 Conative knowledge

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10 I have formulated VK in terms of mental representation. The idea is that knowledge is a relation between mind and world. Thus, given VK, non-mental representations – sentences and pictures, for example – cannot amount to knowledge, although their content may be saliently known, and we might felicitously call them items of “knowledge” in that case, in the same way that we call propositions “knowledge” when they are saliently known.


12 Zagzebski 1996, p. 45 and passim.
Goodness is the correctness condition for desire (§1) and knowledge is apt mental representation (§2). Given the assumption that desires are mental representations, we can conclude that there is such a thing as conative knowledge, namely, apt desire. In other words:

**Virtue-theoretic account of conative knowledge (VCK):** Conative knowledge is apt desire, i.e. your desire for $x$ amounts to knowledge if and only if it is apt, where your desire for $x$ is apt if and only if it is correct and its correctness manifests one or more of your conative virtues, where conative virtues are reliable capacities to form correct desires (and to avoid forming incorrect desires).

To put that another way, apt desire is a species of knowledge, i.e. desire sometimes amounts to knowledge.

Above (§1), I said that desires are representations of goodness in the same way that beliefs are representations of truth. The sense in which beliefs are representations of truth is that truth is the correctness condition for belief. When you know a representation’s correctness condition, you know what it is a representation of. Given GCD, we know that that desires are representations of goodness. Given VCK, then, we can conclude that conative knowledge is a species of evaluative knowledge, i.e. knowledge of goodness. (But it is not the only species, since evaluative beliefs – i.e. beliefs about what is good – also sometimes amount to knowledge.)

Let’s consider a case to illustrate VCK. Consider Smith, a prejudiced jailer. Smith holds an extremely negative view of the moral status of her prisoners, who belong to a marginalized outgroup (class, caste, race, etc.), such that, specifically, she believes that their suffering is not intrinsically bad. Smith’s job requires treating her prisoners very roughly. However, despite her prejudice, Smith finds her work distasteful. She does not like it. She finds herself wanting to go easy on her prisoners – i.e. to refrain from hitting them, to sneak them food, etc. – even though she believes that she has no reason to do so, since doing so would be in no way good. Smith is embarrassed by her desire to go easy on her prisoners, which she attributes to a lack of discipline, believing, as she does, that going easy on her prisoners would not be good. But she is wrong about the source of her feelings: her desire to go easy on her prisoners actually manifests compassion, a compassion which has survived despite her indoctrination. To put that another way, her desire is a response to the intrinsic badness of their suffering, to which she is, in spite of her prejudice, sensitive, and thus a response to the goodness of going easy on them. This responsiveness is evidenced by the fact that she is not generally tempted not to do her job – she doesn’t mind passing out the prisoner’s mail, sweeping the floors, etc. It is only when her job calls for rough treatment of the prisoners that she finds herself wanting to shirk her duties. Smith is not the undisciplined jailer she takes herself to be; she is actually a compassionate, if prejudiced, jailer.

Smith’s desire to go easy on her prisoners is apt. First, it is correct – assuming, for the sake of argument, that it would be good were she to go easy on her prisoners. Second, its correctness manifests a reliable capacity for desire-formation, namely, Smith’s compassion – assuming, for the sake of argument, that compassion is such a capacity. Given VCK, therefore, Smith’s desire to go easy on her prisoners amounts to conative knowledge of the goodness of going easy on her prisoners.
This is an appealing result, for at least two reasons. First, suppose that Smith acts on her desire to go easy on her prisoners. In that case, that Smith knows the goodness of going easy on her prisoners explains why is rational and virtuous for her to act as she does. Acting on her desire to go easy on her prisoners is not a case of “giving in to temptation” or “letting her emotions get the better of her” – even though Smith is inclined to describe things that way. When Smith acts on her desire, she is wisely trusting her reliable feelings, despite their conflict with her bigoted ideology. If Smith did not know the goodness of going easy on her prisoners, we could not easily make sense of her actions as rational or virtuous. We might welcome her actions as fortuitous, but we could not plausibly praise Smith for her rationality or virtue. But that would miss something important about the difference between Smith, as described, and her undisciplined counterpart. The undisciplined jailer who goes easy on her prisoners out of laziness enjoys a kind of moral luck – she ends up doing the right thing, but does not deserve credit for it. Smith, by contrast, deserves credit for going easy on her prisoners. That is easily explained by the conclusion that her action is based on knowledge of the goodness of going easy on her prisoners.

Second, suppose that Smith does not act on her desire to go easy on her prisoners, and continues to treat them roughly. In that case, that Smith knows the goodness of going easy on her prisoners explains why she is morally culpable for her actions. Smith’s cognitive commitment to the worthlessness of her prisoners’ lives does not excuse her conduct, given her conative awareness of their lives’ worth. There is an important moral difference between Smith, on the one hand, and the wholehearted jailer, whose desires are in line with their bigoted beliefs. Smith is blameworthy in a way that the wholehearted jailer isn’t. This is not to say that the wholehearted prejudiced jailer isn’t blameworthy – perhaps they are, e.g. in virtue of the fact that they are responsible for their uncritical acceptance of their negative beliefs about the targeted outgroup. But they are not blameworthy in the way that Smith is blameworthy: Smith is aware of the badness of her prisoners’ suffering. That she continues to treat her prisoners roughly desire such awareness betrays a kind of vice that is not present in the case of the wholehearted jailer. All this sits well with the conclusion that Smith has knowledge of the goodness of going easy on her prisoners.

Note well: the case of Smith is offered here to illustrate VCK. It is not meant to serve as the basis of an intuition-based argument for VCK. You can imagine how such an argument would go: Smith has knowledge of the goodness of going easy on her prisoners; VCK vindicates that intuition; therefore, VCK is true. The problem is that this is an inference to the best explanation argument, and there is a salient alternative explanation of Smith’s knowledge: that she believes that it would be good were she to go easy on her prisoners. Granted, she also believes that it would not be good were she to go easy on her prisoners; but such is the inconsistency that comes to the compassionate person whose beliefs are warped by ideology. We might say that it is counterintuitive that Smith believes that it would be good were she to go easy on her prisoners. But intuitions may differ, and philosophers may be committed to accounts of belief which imply that Smith believes that it would be good were she to go easy on her prisoners. Thus, there is no dialectically effective way to articulate such an intuition-based argument for VCK.

\[\text{13} \text{ Cf. Bennett 1974, Audi 1990, MacIntyre 1990, Arpaly 2000, 2004. Note that the present version of the case involves a clash between Smith’s} \, \text{evaluative} \, \text{beliefs – her beliefs about what is good – and her desires, rather than a clash between her normative beliefs – her beliefs about what she ought to do – and her actions.}\]

4 Conclusion

I have argued that there is such a thing as conative knowledge (§3). One big question remains. Just as the question of the nature of propositional knowledge is distinct from the question of the scope of propositional knowledge, the question of the nature of conative knowledge is distinct from the question of the scope of conative knowledge. We might accept that propositional knowledge is apt belief, for example, and thus accept that there is such a thing as propositional knowledge, and yet be unsure whether anyone’s beliefs are apt. Likewise, we can accept that conative knowledge is apt desire, and thus accept that there is such a thing as conative knowledge, and yet be unsure whether anyone’s desires are apt. And just as the question of whether our beliefs are apt comprises both the question of whether the propositions we believe really are true and the question of whether our beliefs really manifest virtue, the question of whether our desires are apt comprises both the question of whether the things we desire really are good and the question of whether our desires really manifest virtue. The answer to neither of those question is obvious.

Bibliography


