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SOCRATIC WISDOM: MIDWIVES, MENTORS,  
AND A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF EPISTEMIC GOODS\*

INTRODUCTION

We seek knowledge, and since finding it ourselves is not always the best way to get it effectively, we seek out knowledgeable individuals whom we trust to be reliable testifiers, i.e. individuals who share their properly acquired knowledge with us honestly, and whom we expect to admit their lack of knowledge or provide appropriate caveats when necessary (see ZAGZEBSKI 2024). Naturally, a well-functioning community will identify individuals who consistently demonstrate their reliability in this regard. For instance, we distinguish theoretical and practical experts, valuing them for their ability to effectively acquire and disseminate epistemic goods within the community. Therefore, we can cautiously suggest that the social value associated with experts and the value of knowledge are correlated.

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\*Although Socrates is the central figure of this work, it was Professor Jan Kielbasa who remained foremost in my thoughts while writing it: his unmatched courtesy in pointing out mistakes, his extraordinary command of the literature (after speaking with him, one could safely assume that if he did not mention a source, it likely did not exist), and—most meaningfully—his exemplary mentorship of students into skilled researchers—of whom I am but an imperfect example. This paper is dedicated, first and foremost, to him.

In recent months, I have had to say farewell to two other masters and academic supervisors, to whose memory I dedicate this work as well: Professor Jan A. Kłoczowski and Professor Andrzej J. Nowak. As I wrote this article, I often thought with gratitude of other mentors and teachers who have significantly shaped my thinking and to whom I owe a great intellectual debt: Jocelyn Benoist, Wayne D. Riggs, Steve Grimm, and Sandy Goldberg. I can only hope that any imperfections in this paper do not obscure their remarkable guidance.

However, there are other types of epistemic agents who do not necessarily provide us with knowledge, but whom society recognises and honours. Such an example would be Socrates, whose epistemic contribution to society was not the knowledge he gained, but rather guidance and education of other epistemic agents.<sup>1</sup> The social value of his role, which we can tentatively call mentorship, is not derived from any acquired standard epistemic goods like knowledge or understanding. Yet, it seems that this social value is connected to a good that we might want to include in the scope of epistemic values.

The primary goal of this article is to make the case for the necessity of nuancing our understanding of what counts as epistemic goods, built on an analysis of the role of mentors in the epistemic community. In section 1, to facilitate this discussion, I provide a brief overview of a product-like understanding of epistemic goods and the corresponding roles within the epistemic community. In section 2, I delve deeper into the epistemic social function of Socrates. I identify three roles he played in his community and evaluate how the received theory of epistemic values can accommodate them. Section 3 presents an argument for the need of a more nuanced account of epistemic values, introducing the concept of agent-centred goods alongside product-like goods. I further explore other-regarding virtues and attitudes that contribute to the development of both types of goods. This distinction leads to the identification of distinct spheres of epistemic goods and their respective contributions to the well-being of the epistemic community. In section 4, I address potential objections concerning the expansion of the scope of epistemic evaluation. Drawing from SINGER's (2023) "truth-loving epistemic consequentialism" and insights from non-ideal epistemology, I demonstrate that such an expansion is not unjustified and has reasonable precedents in contemporary social epistemology.

## 1. KNOWERS, TESTIFIERS, EXPERTS

Traditionally, epistemology has centred around the question of knowledge as a pivotal epistemic achievement.<sup>2</sup> While the discussion on the value of

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<sup>1</sup> In the paper, I am considering both the historical, *elenctic* Socrates, and the Platonic, *maieutic* Socrates. I explain my approach in section 2.

<sup>2</sup> In the main argument, I leave open the question of the variety of epistemic achievements—which apart from (propositional) knowledge plausibly include different epistemic kinds such as knowledge-how, knowledge by acquaintance, Franciscan knowledge (STUMP 2000), various types

knowledge, true justified beliefs, and truth itself may continue, it is safe to say that the driving force behind endless epistemological debates lies in the common belief that people require knowledge (see KELP 2021).

In social terms, knowledge, akin to any other achievement, serves to distinguish some epistemic agents (CRAIG 1990; GRECO 2010; HANNON 2019; REYNOLDS 2017). We can illustrate it with a metaphor of a map. At the outset, we have a network of connections between individuals, representing the social ties that shape our lives. Initially, this map appears flat, lacking distinct epistemically significant points. Then, considering the epistemic resources of each individual, we can stratify this map. We might want to include both their epistemic achievements (product-like epistemic goods), and their personal faculties and qualities that lend them credibility as people who are more likely to get things epistemically right. Depending on our needs and the domains of competence of other epistemic agents, the knowledge of the epistemic profiles of others allows us to make rational choices in practice: whom and when to trust (also: when to trust others and when we ourselves are in the best epistemic position).

This epistemic diversity is crucial because it aligns with social interests related to knowledge. In this respect, it is helpful to revisit Craig's story of identifying reliable informants (CRAIG 1990; see also HANNON 2019; REYNOLDS 2017). As a reminder, in his functionalist reconstruction of the concept of knowledge, Craig envisions a mythical state of nature where individuals strive for true beliefs. These beliefs are essential for their survival. We can envision a myriad of such strategic questions: which fruits are edible, where is the game, how to light a fire, whether there is any danger nearby, etc. Some of these questions can be answered personally, albeit with some effort. Others necessitate experience, and, likely, this knowledge was initially acquired within the community through trial and error, some of which were fatal. Consequently, it seems totally unreasonable to demand that this knowledge be acquired anew every time. The collective intelligence of the community ensures that it does not perform the same (epistemic) work twice if it can avoid it. If there is an available knowledgeable agent nearby, the simplest way to acquire knowledge is to identify a relevant testifier and obtain it from them.

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of understanding (GRIMM 2019)—as well as the analysis of knowledge (in particular, whether it is analysable, the threshold problem, and whether we should content ourselves with smaller achievements than knowledge). For convenience, whenever I'm writing about knowledge, I am using Grimm's idea to treat it as a general kind with propositional knowledge, understanding, and other epistemic kinds as various species of knowledge.

On Craig's account, knowledge is the distinctive factor between reliable informants and accidental truth holders. Notably, Craig's account proposes a social explanation of the value of knowledge. Our communities are based on the division of epistemic labour (GOLDBERG 2011). While a true, accidental belief can be just as effective in practice as knowledge,<sup>3</sup> from a social perspective, we need norms that serve as a seal of quality to promote good practices and, consequently, good informants, ensuring our communities function safely as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of the account we adopt of the value of knowledge, truth, and other epistemic goods, a plausible conclusion from considerations so far is that the value of epistemic goods is correlated with the value of certain social positions within the community. For instance, we recognise experts because they acquire advanced epistemic goods and make them accessible to us. Just as the requirements for knowledge can be reconstructed based on the social need to distinguish safe beliefs, the value of distinguished epistemic agents is directly linked to the possession of these goods.

So far, I have adopted a rather conservative stance regarding epistemic goods and the source of epistemic goodness. It focuses on epistemic achievements that enable our cognitive contact with the world. Regardless of whether the value of knowledge and other epistemic products is constitutive, intrinsic, or instrumental, they serve as the foundation for the epistemic value of all other entities. In this vein, if one adheres to process reliabilism, the cognitive process is deemed valuable because it systematically (co-)produces epistemic products that possess inherent value. While reliability is a component of the value of processes,<sup>5</sup> the ultimate basis for a systematic process being regarded as valuable lies in the goodness of its products.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, if one adheres to virtue reliabilism, the value of virtue is based on knowledge it reliably produces. Virtue responsibilism might be a bit more complex, since it holds that virtue has two components: reliability and proper motivation. As a consequence, the value of virtue appears to be bidimensional. The first component reduces to what was said about virtue reliabilism, the value of the second one is, according to Zagzebski (1996), moral. Thus, it is still safe to say that whatever amounts to the *epistemic* value of intellectual virtues, it is connected to the production of knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, it appears false beliefs might even be more effective in practice (see TALBOT 2024).

<sup>4</sup> This aligns with the social account of epistemic norms (cf. BOULT 2024; DOGRAMACI 2012; HANNON and WOODARD, 2026; HENDERSON and GRAHAM 2019; KAUPPINEN 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion between Riggs (2002) and Zagzebski (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Just contrast this with a process systematically producing false beliefs.

If we retain this plausible model, similarly to processes and virtues, the epistemic evaluation of epistemic agents and practices will focus on contribution to the production of epistemic goods. Thus, we might propose a general account of epistemic value based on production of epistemic goods:

Epistemic Value: For any *X* that is not itself an epistemic product, the epistemic value of *X* is instrumental, deriving from its contribution to the production of epistemic goods.

This approach appears uncontroversial, and I do not intend, in principle, to challenge it. However, it is all too easy to restrict contributions to epistemic goods solely to the more direct or immediately apparent forms of production. Moreover, it is easy to conflate epistemic goods with epistemic achievements themselves, thereby underestimating—or at times overlooking—those goods which, while contributing more indirectly, nonetheless play a significant role in enhancing our overall epistemic position by ultimately supporting achievements such as knowledge and understanding. This suggests that it may be worthwhile to supplement Epistemic Value with additional definitions which, even if ultimately reducible to it, shift the emphasis in ways that highlight the broader spectrum of social roles that hold epistemic significance. In fact, it appears there are certain social epistemic roles that are not obviously related to the production of knowledge (see also JARCZEWSKI 2024b). However, we recognise their value and would like to attribute this value to the epistemic domain. In the next section, I demonstrate three roles instantiated by Socrates, and analyse possible options to make sense of their epistemic import. Later in the article, building on this, I will propose a reinterpretation of Epistemic Value that enables a clearer understanding and greater appreciation of the epistemic contributions made by these roles.

## 2. THREE FACETS OF SOCRATIC WISDOM

Socrates is a plausible candidate for wisdom, both practical and theoretical. Socrates' authority as a wise person was even confirmed by Apollo through the mouth of the Oracle of Delphi (*Apology*, 21a). However, if wisdom is to be considered one of the highest epistemic achievements, there is an apparent conflict between what was said in section 1 about the source of epistemic values

and how Socratic wisdom might be understood.<sup>7</sup> Epistemic Value linked epistemic value with the production of knowledge. In contrast, Socrates maintained that his wisdom consisted of acknowledged ignorance. Note that it does not mean only that Socrates was wise even if he was ignorant. The statement is stronger: Socratic wisdom was rooted in ignorance (*Apology*, 21d). This is true not only in early dialogues like *Apology* but also in middle dialogues, like *Theaetetus*, where Socrates underlines his epistemic inferiority and ignorance.<sup>8</sup>

In this section, I reconstruct three different roles Socratic wisdom might play in his community. The first one is instantiated in the historical Socrates from earlier dialogues, the critic and expositor of the ignorance of those claiming expertise. His elenctic method is fundamentally negative. It is not intended to acquire new knowledge but rather to purify the appearance of knowledge. In its simplest form, it has three main objectives: (1) to test the knowledge of those who are reputedly wise, leading to (2) exposure of the ignorance of seemingly wise individuals; or (3) to identify genuinely wise people and learn from them (see BENSON 2000, 19).

The social epistemic role associated with *elenchus* can be linked with debunking<sup>9</sup> and corresponds to the work of those who filter our cognitive networks. If we accept Epistemic Value in a narrow reading, we face a challenge in explaining how Socrates' role as a debunker is epistemically valuable. Socrates does not directly contribute to the generation of new knowledge within the community. However, there is a straightforward solution to this issue. We should acknowledge that the primary epistemic goal is not simply production of true beliefs, but it is to provide a comprehensive world-picture (cf. SINGER 2023). Only this goal is achieved through two subordinate yet equivalent objectives: maximising true beliefs and minimising false ones. Thus, if we consider that the primary, value-creating, cognitive good is an adequate world-picture (one that provides cognitive contact with reality), then we contribute to its production not only by producing knowledge, but also by eliminating false beliefs from our cognitive resources. The fewer illusions that distort this image, the more accurate it becomes. Therefore, we can attempt to explain the value of Socrates' *elenchus* role in this manner.

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<sup>7</sup> I have presented my preferred, comprehensive functionalist account of theoretical wisdom in JARCZEWSKI (2025c).

<sup>8</sup> Socrates presents himself as a barren midwife, acknowledging he is “unable to give birth to wisdom” (150c4), he “has nothing wise” (150c6), or is “not entirely wise” (150d1).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for a friendly suggestion on terminology.

The understanding of Socrates' epistemic social role becomes more intricate when we consider his maieutic method. It is widely recognised that *maieutic* is not so much a method of historical Socrates but of a character created by Plato himself (BENSON 2000; SEDLEY 2004). This Platonic Socrates primarily appears in the middle dialogues, reflecting Plato's assertion of his own voice. Since the present work is systematic rather than historical, I am not interested in reconstructing which part of dialogues corresponds to Socrates, and which to Plato. My interest is a specific kind of wisdom exemplified by Socrates as presented in dialogues which has eventually become an exemplar of a wise person in our culture.

For Platonic Socrates, the critical *elenchus* is merely an initial phase of his methodological approach. The revelation of current ignorance serves as a purification necessary for the positive birth of knowledge. The role of the midwife is to facilitate this process in the learner. Socrates guides them on the right path through his questions, prompting them to seek nuances, understanding, and simultaneously rejecting unsatisfactory solutions.

This role is best viewed in the framework which distinguishes passive and active learning (LEIGH 2008). In the former, a learner just accepts knowledge which is transmitted to them. In the latter one, they are provoked by the teacher to do their own epistemic work and discover things for themselves. The maieutic method exemplifies the latter model. Socrates initiates a dialogue, inviting the interlocutor to actively participate, provoking critical thinking, and promoting open-mindedness. His primary objective is not to impart any epistemic goods but rather to enhance the learner's cognitive abilities.

In this model, the value of Socratic support could also be understood in terms of knowledge production. We need individuals like Socrates because we may be limited and unable to acquire advanced cognitive goods on our own. Just as we rely on spectacles and microscopes for visual perception, and electronic "prostheses" for calculations, searches, and data analyses in our daily lives—not only in science—perhaps we can also envision a form of human extensions of our cognition.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, Socratic support would enter the process of knowledge production and, in some cases, could become an indispensable element of it.

This understanding of Socrates's function aligns with Kawall's (2020) concept of indirect credit in producing a belief in an agent:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For general literature on "extended cognition", see CARTER ET AL. (2018a, 2018b), PRITCHARD (2010).

<sup>11</sup> See also GREEN (2016), JARCZEWSKI and RIGGS (2025).

One garners indirect epistemic credit in the formation of a belief to the extent that one (a) intentionally attempts to help to generate knowledge or other some epistemically valuable state in an agent, (b) plays a suitably important or salient role through ability in the production of the belief as such, (c) and its truth, without playing a creditable role in its specific content. (472)

Kawall illustrates this concept with an example of someone who meticulously calibrates a measuring instrument before the actual experiment. What sets indirect credit apart from direct credit is that ultimately, it is the main agent, not the assistant, who forms the knowledgeable belief. This aligns with Socrates' role as an epistemic support in reasoning. His primary objective is to assist his learner in acquiring knowledge. Whether Socrates gains knowledge for himself is not of primary importance to him.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems that calling Socrates a wise man extends beyond merely assisting in the production of epistemic goods. The second role fails to fully explain why we hold him in such high esteem. In contrast, Socrates' true value lies in that by guiding his mentees through individual inquiries, he fosters their epistemic skills and enables them to be excellent epistemic agents on their own. And this is the third epistemic social role of Socrates, the mentoring.

Socrates' role extends beyond assisting individual inquiries; he aims to train mentees to become independent, well-thinking agents (see SEDLEY 2004, 36–37). This ambition is evident in the example of Theaetetus, whom Socrates later instructed to engage in dialogue with the Stranger (*Sophist*, 217d–218b). The success of the mentoring in *Theaetetus* lies not in acquiring specific epistemic goods through the original dialogue, but in training Theaetetus to conduct dialogues in the future, replacing Socrates' role.

This function of the mentor as a trainer of epistemic agents appears socially valuable in a non-controversial way. However, Epistemic Value might not be best suited to account for the personal dimension of these values. Student formation may not directly contribute to any epistemic goods understood as products. Moreover, it seems that a mentor, given the choice between conducting their own research or devoting time and energy to training mentees, would likely be more beneficial to the community by increasing epistemic goods if they devote themselves to their own research. However, we believe it is highly valuable for a mentor to sacrifice some potential epistemic goods for the sake of student formation. An unspecified, generic version of Epistemic Value might not capture this important contribution. In the worst-case scenario, when a conflict

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<sup>12</sup> An interesting variant of this maieutic role can be identified in Lackey's case of the Creationist Teacher (LACKEY 2008, 48). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

arises between activities that directly produce knowledge and those that support it in the long term—such as through the formation of epistemic agents—the more immediate contribution of the former may suggest that the latter should be sacrificed. To prevent this, and to ensure that epistemic value can be properly translated into practical principles, it should be supplemented with a more nuanced typology of epistemic goods.

### 3. VARIETY OF EPISTEMIC GOODS

In the previous section, I outlined three possible epistemic social roles that can be attributed to Socrates: debunking (filtering), epistemic support (prosthesis), and mentoring. While a generalised understanding of epistemic goals can account for the epistemic value of the first role, and the concept of indirect credit for knowledge production can explain the second, the third role—which seems to be the most significant contribution of the Platonic Socrates—requires a more explicit account of varieties of epistemic goods.

Epistemic Value as it stands is associated with the production of epistemic goods, such as knowledge. However, when we consider cognition within its broader social context, this perspective offers a limited view of what constitutes the epistemic life of communities and what contributes to their epistemic flourishing. JOHNSON (2023) highlights this issue by distinguishing between epistemic productive labour and the equally important reproductive labour. While the former involves acquiring new knowledge and deepening understanding, the latter focuses on strengthening epistemic agents themselves. Scientists, innovators, and explorers exemplify productive labour, whereas teachers, lecturers, but also the entire administrative staff of universities embody reproductive labour.

Johnson's work critically examines contemporary epistemic institutions, arguing that this division between productive and reproductive labour is not socially neutral. Since epistemology traditionally prioritises the former, epistemic axiology has been built around the valuation of produced goods, often relegating reproductive goods to a secondary status. What is worse, the unequal valuation of productive and reproductive goods translates into broader social and economic injustices (JOHNSON 2023, 155–66). Society tends to place greater value on explorers than on teachers, a bias reflected in earning structure and institutional recognition. This dynamic reinforces existing social inequalities, as the division between these activities aligns with disparities related to gender, race, economic status, and ethnicity.

Johnson consistently underscores the significance of reproductive labour, contrasting it with the undeniable value of productive labour. While the latter focuses on epistemic goods, the former is concerned with the well-being and development of the epistemic community itself. Reproductive labour ensures the stability of the community, meets its foundational needs, and facilitates generational exchange. Thus, both synchronically and diachronically, it is essential for the community's survival. Although often invisible, this form of labour is indispensable for enabling and sustaining productive epistemic labour.

Johnson does not engage with virtue epistemology or the question of epistemic values. One might be tempted to adopt her framework while recognising only productive work as genuinely epistemic. However, I propose an alternative approach that integrates both essential functions within epistemic communities—production and reproduction—into a unified theory of epistemic value.

Rather than linking epistemic value directly and solely to the production of epistemic goods, I propose a reinterpretation which emphasises the epistemic enhancement of communities:

Social Epistemic Value: For any X that is not itself an epistemic product, the epistemic value of X is instrumental, deriving from its contribution to the epistemic strengthening of the epistemic community (i.e. its enhancement of the community's epistemic well-being).<sup>13</sup>

This approach encompasses existing product-like epistemic goods, as their production undeniably contributes to the epistemic enrichment of the community. However, it also provides a more expansive framework that recognises additional ways in which the epistemic well-being of the community can be enhanced. An equally important way is the development and improvement of epistemic agents themselves. The epistemic strength of a community is not solely determined by the epistemic achievements it possesses but also—perhaps more fundamentally—by the strength of its individual agents.

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<sup>13</sup> Importantly, my reinterpretation does not conflict with the view that social epistemic value ultimately reduces to the value of connected product-like epistemic goods—such as knowledge or understanding—to which other goods contribute. However, there are both theoretical and practical advantages to reversing this perspective and shifting the emphasis from the epistemic products to the epistemic community that benefits from them. This change in emphasis allows us to recognise less obvious epistemic roles and more distant contributions to the production of epistemic goods. In this sense, my argument is not so much reformist as it is a call for a more nuanced account of what constitutes an epistemic good (and the corresponding virtues), and why we value certain epistemic actions and attitudes. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to be more *explicit* about my theoretical aims. See also JARCZEWSKI (2025a, 2024a, 2025b)

Viewed from this perspective, we can recognise the significance of virtues and roles that do not directly contribute to the production of epistemic goods but instead serve to enhance other epistemic agents. This enhancement can take two forms: product-related and agent-related. The former occurs when knowledge and other epistemic goods are disseminated within the community, corresponding to the role of a theoretical teacher. The latter arises when the target of the second-personal epistemic engagement is the epistemic agent themselves, aligning with the role of a mentor as a trainer of epistemic agents.

From this emerges a picture of four ways of contributing to the epistemic well-being of a community:

		Epistemic good	
		Product	Agent
Direction	Self-regarding	Epistemic goods	Virtues and abilities of an agent
	Other-regarding	Knowledge transmission	Formation of epistemic agents

We contribute to the epistemic well-being of our community by producing goods, developing our own epistemic virtues and abilities, sharing knowledge with others, and fostering the epistemic growth of others. Only the first method directly increases the quantity of epistemic products within the community. However, the value of these products extends beyond their immediate existence; they also serve as a basis for further epistemic production, thereby facilitating new inquiries. To fully utilise this intellectual potential, we must provide others with these epistemic goods so that they could engage in new inquiries that we ourselves may be unable to conduct due to constraints such as time limitations or personal capacities. Moreover, the effectiveness of this social “epistemic factory” is contingent upon the quality of its members. The stronger the epistemic agents, the more efficiently the community functions. Finally, since the epistemic community is dynamic, we can shape and enhance its members, fostering their development into better agents. This is precisely the role of the mentors. Within this framework, Socrates’ primary contribution lies in his efforts to improve the epistemic well-being of his community by training and cultivating superior epistemic agents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An anonymous referee suggested considering a scenario where it might be beneficial for a community if a Socrates-like mentor were to cultivate a kind of epistemic vice in a student—specifically, fostering an extreme scepticism even toward common-sense knowledge claims. This,

#### 4. WHY SHOULD WE EXTEND EPISTEMIC EVALUATION?

In the previous section, I argued that epistemic life extends far beyond the production of epistemic goods such as knowledge. We must also recognise personal epistemic goods, as well as broader epistemic goods embedded in institutions, organisations, and procedures that constitute epistemic communities. These communities serve as the environments in which epistemic products are acquired, maintained, and transmitted. In some cases, these broader epistemic goods contribute directly to the production of knowledge, while in others, their role is less immediately apparent, leading to the risk of their being undervalued. Although this might seem like a merely nominal issue of whether we distinguish

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of course, touches on a broader and longstanding debate regarding the potential social virtuousness of individual vices (MERCIER and SPERBER 2017; LEVY and ALFANO 2020; O'ROURKE-FRIEL 2025). Addressing this fully would require a more extensive treatment of the relationship between individual and communal virtues, which lies beyond the present scope. Nevertheless, I can offer some preliminary thoughts.

There seem to be two possible approaches to the question of how a mentor should form their students to make sense of the benefits of vicious epistemic attitudes. One is to conceptualise the mentor as a kind of demiurge who orchestrates the communal pursuit of knowledge by strategically positioning agents whose seemingly vicious attitudes—like excessive scepticism—ultimately contribute instrumentally to common epistemic goods. While such a model may be effective, it risks reducing individuals to mere instruments, used to achieve communal ends without regard for their own epistemic character and personal benefits.

A second and, I think, more attractive option is to treat agents as reflective subjects who are aware of and committed to a broader epistemic strategy. Within this framework, contextual scepticism may itself be a virtue. The agent, understanding the dynamics of communal cognition, recognises that the group benefits most when individuals adopt epistemic stances that, in isolation, might seem excessive or deficient. Yet these attitudes, when appropriately distributed across the community, interact in ways that enhance the reliability of collective inquiry. On this view, an agent may knowingly adopt a stance of heightened scepticism in specific contexts, not out of blind disposition but as a deliberate and reflexively justified contribution to a group epistemic process. Such an agent is not truly vicious since their behaviour is guided by a deeper understanding of a virtue as context-sensitive and relational. Indeed, their epistemic flexibility—the capacity to modulate their attitude based on what the situation demands—stands in contrast to that of a “programmed”, blind sceptic, who acts the same way regardless of context and whose utility to the community is therefore limited.

We should thus prefer the latter: a conditional, contextual sceptic who can adapt epistemic attitude in light of communal needs. Even if forming an epistemically vicious agent might yield some benefit, forming an agent who can *appear* vicious while actually exemplifying a context-sensitive virtue would be more beneficial still. What appears to be a vice, in this light, is better understood as a specialised virtue (which triggers “vicious” behaviours when the context for joint epistemic work makes it a part of a communal reliable knowledge-forming process). Notably, Socrates himself exemplified a similar virtue. His relentless questioning of Athenian common knowledge may have resembled a vice, but in fact served a higher epistemic purpose. I am deeply grateful to the referee for this thought-provoking question, which opens the door to a paper on its own. I hope that the present, provisional answer is sufficient for current purposes while also inviting further discussion.

other than product-like epistemic goods, or focus on product-like goods and explain everything in their terms, insights from JOHNSON (2023) and works on epistemic injustice (FRICKER 2007; MEDINA 2013; KIDD ET AL. 2017) suggest that it is not indifferent to normative epistemology on which epistemic goods the emphasis is placed.

One potential objection to this broader understanding of epistemic goods is the risk of an overly expansive definition, leading to a loss of conceptual clarity regarding what is genuinely epistemic. In response to this concern, I propose a clarificatory move: to begin by specifying what it means for X to have epistemic value. As a useful criterion, drawing inspiration from Singer's Truth-Loving Epistemic Consequentialism, I propose the following:

Epistemic: X has epistemic value iff it promotes an accurate world-picture.  
(cf. SINGER 2023, 37, 168, 213)

First, this criterion builds upon the most general epistemic goal—constructing an accurate representation of the world—while subsuming two particular and widely accepted epistemic goals: maximising truth and minimising falsity. These specific goals are seen as being in tension, since promoting one can sometimes hinder the other.<sup>15</sup> In practice, sound theories of knowledge aim to strike a balance between trust and filtering, identifying reliable means to navigate the trade-offs between believing truths and avoiding falsehoods. Singer's approach captures this overarching goal without committing to a particular resolution of the tension between the two.

Second, this general approach avoids pitfalls of simplistic veritism, which treats all truths as epistemically equal. That view would place trivial truths—such as the number of blades of grass—on a par with more substantial ones. Instead, as Singer argues, “a belief that P is right if and only if, among the available options for belief, believing P conduces to the best overall balance of having true beliefs and not having false beliefs” (SINGER 2023, 51). This consequentialist framing allows us to weigh beliefs differently in terms of their contribution to the main epistemic goal.

Third, the criterion is expansive enough to include epistemic achievements beyond propositional knowledge—most notably, objectual understanding as a desirable epistemic good. This allows for recognition of contributions to the

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<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, if we take either goal—truth-maximisation or falsity-minimisation—in isolation to its extreme, we face paradoxical strategies. For example, the best way to maximise true beliefs (i.e., avoiding omitting true beliefs) might be to accept all beliefs, while the surest strategy for minimising false beliefs (i.e., avoiding accepting any false beliefs) might lead us to reject all beliefs.

accuracy of our world-picture beyond the quantity of true beliefs. It accommodates at least equally significant contributions of grasping new conceptual connections between beliefs, which shapes a more coherent and integrated cognitive framework.

Importantly, if we accept this criterion of what counts as epistemic, we can justifiably include within epistemic evaluation certain features of the world that are not themselves epistemic in nature. Since cognition is deeply socially embedded, the structure of groups and institutions, the nature of interpersonal relations, and public policies securing cognitive resources—all of these, though not epistemic *per se*, can have a significant contribution to a community's epistemic flourishing. In this context, Greco (2020, 75) differentiates between social norms with epistemic content and social norms without epistemic content but with indirect epistemic consequences (see also SIMION 2018). If our aim is not only to provide a concise theory of epistemic evaluation but also *improve* our epistemic performance, then a sort of moderate theoretical impurity—i.e., incorporating extra-epistemic factors—seems not only justifiable but necessary.<sup>16</sup>

Further support for the proposed account comes from recent work in non-ideal epistemology, which highlights various personal and institutional, epistemic, and non-epistemic factors that hinder our success as epistemic agents—factors often overlooked by classical, idealised epistemology (virtue epistemology in particular) (LEVY 2021; MCKENNA 2023). While space constraints prevent a full discussion of this critique of standard normative epistemology, it is interesting to consider some of the disturbing phenomena that call for a reassessment of epistemic norms. I shall argue that even if the intention of some authors might

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<sup>16</sup> For those who remain sceptical about incorporating extra-epistemic factors, a middle-ground solution is possible. One can broaden the scope of epistemic contributions beyond narrow knowledge production while maintaining a stricter sense of genuinely epistemic contribution. For instance, a plausible refinement of Epistemic would be the following:

Intrinsically Epistemic: X has intrinsic epistemic value iff its essential function (e.g., from an evolutionary or functionalist perspective) is to *eventually* enhance the accuracy of our world-picture.

This would allow us to count, for example, the cultivation of reliable inquirers as epistemically valuable, insofar as doing so enhances collective epistemic performance. The educational role of teachers, under this interpretation, bears intrinsically epistemic value because it exists to improve our communal epistemic outcomes. In contrast, while proper nutrition, salary, and electricity may contribute to epistemic success, they are not intrinsically epistemic because their purpose is not to constitutively promote an accurate world-picture. This line of argument is inspired by the compelling work of O'Rourke-Friel (2025). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on that point.

That being said, in the following paragraphs, I offer some additional arguments why we might want to include non-epistemic factors within the epistemic evaluation anyway.

be to question the very existence of virtue epistemology, these phenomena indirectly point to the importance of personal epistemic goods.

One such phenomenon is the impact of social oppression—whether based on race, gender, or other factors—on epistemic agency. Situations of epistemic injustice can compel members of marginalised groups to adopt epistemic attitudes that, in an idealised context, might be classified as epistemic vices, such as epistemic pride or arrogance (MEDINA 2013).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in an environment saturated with political propaganda, sectarian indoctrination, or morally objectionable stereotypes (e.g. chauvinism, racism, machismo), the epistemic goal of minimising false beliefs may take precedence over maximising true beliefs (LEVY 2023). As Battaly (2018) has argued, under such conditions, traditionally virtuous attitudes like open-mindedness may become epistemically detrimental, while close-mindedness or even dogmatism—typically seen as epistemic vices—may function as protective strategies that strengthen the epistemic resilience of the oppressed.

These issues challenge some fundamental claims about the nature, stability, and evaluation of individual epistemic virtues and vices. At the same time, it strikes me that part of the description of these situations is the epistemic challenges related to the standpoint of agents and communities. While these challenges result in the deprivation of crucial epistemic products, the harm extends beyond this loss—it is fundamentally tied to the lack of expected epistemic personal goods.

One possible option is to separate the moral and epistemic domains in a way that the deprivation of personal goods would be classified as a moral harm, while epistemic evaluation would remain confined to the production of epistemic goods. However, given the deep interconnection between product-based and personal epistemic goods, such a separation appears artificial and with low explanatory power.

Ultimately, what truly matters is not solely epistemic products a community possesses, but the general form of this community whose epistemic products are only one constituent. Consider a hypothetical community with a small elite of highly productive researchers generating an abundance of epistemic goods. If the entire community is nonetheless governed by fundamentalist dogma, prejudice, and an inability to distinguish science from pseudoscience, its mere production of epistemic goods may be less valuable than that of a more integrated, epistemically healthier community with a broader distribution of epistemic

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<sup>17</sup> This echoes earlier discussion in virtue ethics, see TESSMAN (2005). Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

competence, even if the latter community produces fewer epistemic goods than the former one. In the former community, the advanced epistemic achievements of the elite will remain isolated, and the epistemic community won't be shaped by them.

Knowledge has practical consequences, as does the epistemic condition of a community. A flourishing epistemic community is not merely one that amasses significant epistemic products; it must also be well-organised and cultivate epistemic virtue. In building such communities, we require not only epistemic producers but also those who foster the epistemic well-being of the community, its institutions, and its members. In this respect, Socratic wisdom—understood in three proposed senses—plays a vital role in sustaining and enhancing our collective epistemic life.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined how to capture the epistemic value associated with Socratic wisdom. I argued that a narrow understanding of epistemic values—one focused solely on the production of epistemic goods—fails to give justice not only for the role of Socrates but also for a range of other epistemic social roles. Analysing the social functions of epistemic agents reveals a variety of distinct interests that contribute to the flourishing of an epistemic community. While the value of epistemic products is undeniable, a closer examination exposes diverse community-centred needs. The example of Socrates highlights three additional epistemic functions that play a crucial role in fostering a thriving epistemic environment: filtering, enhancing epistemic faculties, and mentoring. I proposed nuancing the notion of epistemic value by linking it to a broader class of goods and activities that contribute to the epistemic well-being of a community. This approach not only offers a more comprehensive explanation of Socrates' role but also uncovers a range of previously overlooked and marginalised epistemic functions.

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## SOCRATIC WISDOM: MIDWIVES, MENTORS, AND A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF EPISTEMIC GOODS

### Summary

The paper argues for nuancing the understanding of epistemic goods and evaluations by analysing the role of mentors in epistemic communities, with a particular focus on Socrates. While traditional epistemic evaluations emphasise the production of knowledge, some epistemic agents contribute to the epistemic well-being of their communities in ways that do not directly yield these standard goods. For example, the primary role of Socrates was not as a knowledge producer, but as a mentor who guided and educated others. To capture the epistemic significance of such figures, I propose a distinction between product-like and agent-centred epistemic goods. I provide nuance to our understanding of epistemic value by linking it to the epistemic well-being of a community and different ways to improve it.

**Keywords:** wisdom; Socrates; epistemic values; non-ideal epistemology; epistemic community

## MĄDROŚĆ SOKRATYCZNA. POŁOŻNE, MENTORZY I POSZERZONE ROZUMIENIE DÓBR EPISTEMICZNYCH

### Streszczenie

W artykule argumentuję za bardziej zniuansowanym rozumieniem dóbr epistemicznych i ich oceny poprzez analizę roli mentorów w społecznościach epistemicznych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Sokratesa. Podczas gdy tradycyjne oceny epistemiczne kładą nacisk na wytwarzanie wiedzy, niektóre podmioty epistemiczne przyczyniają się do epistemicznego dobrostanu swoich społeczności w sposób, który nie prowadzi bezpośrednio do wytwarzania tych standardowych dóbr. Na przykład podstawową rolę Sokratesa nie było wytwarzanie wiedzy, lecz bycie mentorem, który prowadził i kształcił innych. Aby uchwycić epistemiczne znaczenie takich postaci, proponuję rozróżnienie między „produktowymi” dobrami epistemicznymi a dobrami zorientowanymi na osoby. Wprowadzam zniuansowane rozumienie wartości epistemicznej, wiążąc ją z epistemicznym dobrostanem społeczności oraz różnymi sposobami jego poprawy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mądrość; Sokrates; wartości epistemiczne; epistemologia nieidealna; wspólnota epistemiczna