





Nicholas Rescher  
**Epistemic Merit**  
And other Essays on Human Knowledge



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# Preface

The present book continues my longstanding practice of publishing groups of philosophical essays that originated in occasional lecture and conference presentations. (Details are given in the footnotes.) Notwithstanding their topical diversity they exhibit a uniformity of method in a common attempt to view historically significant philosophical issues in the light of modern perspectives opened up through conceptual clarification.

Over half of the chapters (specifically numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 13) were written as contributions to some venture of scholarly publication. Details are given in the footnotes.

I am grateful, as ever, to Estelle Burris for helping me to put this material into a form suitable for publication.





# EPISTEMIC MERIT AND OTHER ESSAYS ON HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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# Chapter 1

## EPISTEMIC MERIT

### 1. THE IDEA OF EPISTEMIC MERIT

With virtually every sort of choice among alternatives, various different aspects of value are bound to come into consideration. Consider automobiles. In evaluating them with a view to their selective preferability, many different evaluative factors will have to be taken into account: economy of operation, mechanical soundness, driving maneuverability, rider comfort, crash safety, and many others. Or again, consider meals, where one can be superior to another in point of: availability, palatability, nourishability, presentation, economy, convenience (ease of preparation). Just the same sort of situation also prevails with regards to epistemic merit: here too various different factors will come into play.

Epistemic or cognitive merit relates to the positivities and negativities of the claims or contentions that we deem ourselves to know. And it is clear that our convictions about things can exhibit a substantial variety of epistemic positivities. Prominent among these dimensions of propositional merit are:

- truth
- correctness
- probability
- plausibility
- evidentiality/reliability
- informativeness
- precision/accuracy/detail
- utility/applicability
- importance/significance
- novelty/originality/familiarity
- interest

Throughout this range, a statement bears the virtue at issue to the extent that what it claims to obtain does so. So in each case we are dealing with a sliding-scale range or contrast:

- true/false
- correct/incorrect
- precise/imprecise
- probable/improbable
- plausible/implausible
- well-evidentiated/ill-evidentiated
- informative/uninformative
- accurate/imprecise
- useful/unuseful
- important/unimportant
- novel/familiar (trite)
- interesting/uninteresting

All of these scales of evaluation are applicable to our cognitive commitments and inclinations.

Three different factors are at issue on this register, according as the merit relates to truthfulness/reliability, to informativeness, or to utility. The RELIABILITY-ORIENTED merits include: truth, correctness, probability, plausibility, and evidentiality. The INFORMATIVENESS-ORIENTED merits include informativeness, accuracy, and precision. The UTILITY-ORIENTED merits include importance, interest, and novelty/originality. And at this stage a further significant distinction comes into play as well. For on the one hand there stand the *intrinsic* merits relating to the inherent quantity of the information conveyed—its reliability and informativeness. On the other hand there are the *utilitarian* merits relating to the significance and value.

Are the epistemic merits of our claims objective or do they lie in the subjectivity of their endorser's mind? In virtually all cases the former situation obtains. Thus, for example, there is nothing subjective about the issue of whether a body of evidence supports a claim strongly or weakly, or whether a certain claim is precise or vague. The one significant exception here is the matter of *interest*. Whether or not a certain (putative) fact is interesting depends substantially on what

the evaluator happens to be interested in. (Note, however, that *importance* is something else again!)

Propositional merit as here understood is not a feature of what has become known in recent years as “virtue epistemology.” For this subject, as generally understood, addresses the merits of the proceedings and faculties of *knowers*, whereas the presently contemplated merits pertain to *what is known* (or taken to be so). All the same, the conception of epistemic merit is closely linked to the workings of rationality. For other things being equal it would clearly be irrational ever to prefer endorsing a claim of less epistemic merit to one greater. Rational preferability is thus a bridge that connects the merit of beliefs to the crucial virtues of their endorsers.

## 2. TENSION AMONG POSITIVITIES

Ideally we would, of course want to have information that scored high in every dimension of merit: reliability, informativeness, and utility, etc. But in a difficult and complex world ideals are not all that easily realized—in this matter as in others. For the factors of propositional merit often stand in a state of competing tension with others, reflecting a general situation among multi-factual merits at large. Consider an automobile. Here the parameters of merit clearly include such factors as speed, reliability, repair infrequency, safety, operating economy, aesthetic appearance, road-handling ability. But in actual practice such features are so interrelated that they trade off against one another as complementary desiderata where more of *A* means less of *B*. Now it would be ridiculous to have a super-safe car with a maximum speed of two miles per hour. It would be ridiculous to have a car that is inexpensive to operate but spends three-fourths of the time in a repair shop. Invariably, perfection—an all-at-once maximization of every value dimension—is inherently unrealizable because of the inherent interaction of evaluative parameters.<sup>1</sup>

And this situation also holds in our present case. For example, it is a basic principle of epistemology that increased confidence in the correctness of our estimates can always be secured at the price of decreased accuracy. For in general *an inverse relationship obtains between the definiteness or precision of our information and its substan-*

*tiation: detail and security stand in a competing relationship.* We estimate the height of the tree at *around* 25 feet. We are *quite sure* that the tree is  $25 \pm 5$  feet high. We are *virtually certain* that its height is  $25 \pm 10$  feet. But we can be *completely and absolutely sure* that its height is between 1 inch and 100 yards. Of this we are “completely sure” in the sense that we are “absolutely certain,” “certain beyond the shadow of a doubt,” “as certain as we can be of anything in the world,” “so sure that we would be willing to stake your life on it,” and the like. For any sort of estimate whatsoever there is always a characteristic trade-off relationship between the evidential *security* of the estimate, on the one hand (as determinable on the basis of its probability or degree of acceptability), and on the other hand its contentual *detail* (definiteness, exactness, precision, etc.).

And so a complementarity relationship of the sort depicted in Display 1.1 obtains. This was adumbrated in the ideas of the French physicist Pierre Maurice Duhem (1861–1916) and may accordingly be called “Duhem’s Law.”<sup>2</sup> In his classic work on the aim and structure of physical theory,<sup>3</sup> Duhem wrote as follows:

A law of physics possesses a certainty much less immediate and much more difficult to estimate than a law of common sense, but it surpasses the latter by the minute and detailed precision of its predictions ... The laws of physics can acquire this minuteness of detail only by sacrificing something of the fixed and absolute certainty of common-sense laws. *There is a sort of teeter-totter of balance between precision and certainty: one cannot be increased except to the detriment of the other.*<sup>4</sup>

In effect, these two factors—security and detail—stand in a relation of inverse proportionality, as per the picture of Display 1.

In this way too plausibility and novelty can play off against each other. The former is a matter of fitting into the context of what is accustomed and nonsurprising; the latter is a matter of falling outside the range of the familiar.

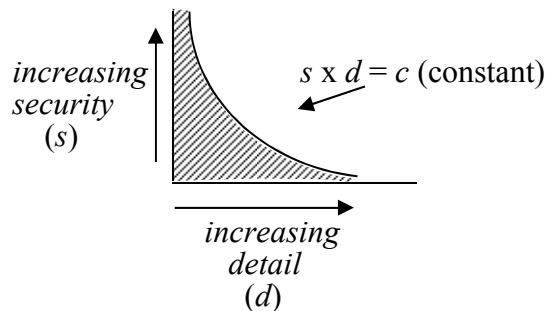
And these examples illustrate very general situation. What might be termed *desideratum complementarity* arises whenever different sorts of merit stand in such an opposing teeter-totter relationship rendering it inevitable that they cannot both achieve a maximal degree at one

and the same time. This sort of situation is a clear indication that the idea of absolute perfection is simply inapplicable and inappropriate in many evaluative situations. The concurrent maximization in every relevant positivity is simply unavailable in this or indeed any other realistically conceivable world. All that one can ever reasonably ask for is an auspicious *combination* of values—an overall optimal *profile* whose nature is bound to depend on the use that its possessor purposes to make of the information at issue.

Display 1

## DUHEM'S LAW

THE COMPLEMENTARITY TRADE-OFF BETWEEN SECURITY AND DEFINITENESS IN ESTIMATION



NOTE: The shaded region inside the curve represents the parametric range of achievable information, with the curve indicating the limit of what is realizable. The concurrent achievement of great detail *and* security is impracticable.

### 3. EROTETIC MERIT

The epistemic merits considered so far have been propositional: they relate to the positivities and negativities of our *claims* (statements, affirmations). But questions too can exhibit merit and deficiencies. Specifically these facets of *erotetic*—i.e., question-oriented—merit include such factors as:

- difficulty
- informativeness
- importance
- novelty