

INTELLECTUALLY VIRTUOUS INQUIRER AND THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF TRUTH*

Sergei M. Levin – PhD,
Associate Professor.
National Research University
Higher School of Economics
(Saint-Petersburg).
16 Soyuz Pechatnikov St.,
190121 Saint-Petersburg,
Russian Federation;
e-mail: slevin@hse.ru

Veritism is the thesis that the truth is the fundamental epistemic good. According to Duncan Pritchard, the most pressing objections to veritism are the trivial truths objection and the trivial inquiry problem. The former states that veritism entails that trivial truths are as important as deep and important truths. The latter is a problem that a veritist must prefer trivial inquiry that generates many trivial truths to the serious inquiry with the hope but no guarantee to discover some deep and important truth. Both objections arise from the inability of veritism *prima facie* to properly rate the different types of truths. Pritchard's solution is to approach the truth from the perspective of the intellectually virtuous inquirer who would prefer weighty truth over trivial truth. In my commentary, I criticise the proposed solution as circular reasoning. The necessary virtue for an intellectually virtuous inquirer is that they would prefer the weighty truth over the trivial one and at the same time, the weighty truth is superior because it is the goal for intellectually virtuous inquirer. I suggest another path to substantiate veritism in the face of the two sibling objections. I argue that truth is the fundamental epistemic good as it makes the epistemic realm practically valuable more than any other epistemic good. The weighty truths are preferable to the trivial ones because the practical value of the deep and important truths is usually higher. The suggested path goes away from the attempts to prove the epistemic value of truth only within the epistemic realm, yet I argue it does not compel the intellectually virtuous inquirer to seek the truth only for the sake of practical reasons.

Keywords: truth, veritism, value, virtue, consequentialism, practice

ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНО ДОБРОДЕТЕЛЬНЫЙ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬ И ПРАКТИЧЕСКАЯ ЦЕННОСТЬ ИСТИНЫ

Левин Сергей Михайлович –
кандидат философских наук,
доцент.
НИУ ВШЭ – Санкт-Петербург.
Российская Федерация,
190121, г. Санкт-Петербург,
ул. Союза Печатников, д. 16;
e-mail: slevin@hse.ru

Веритизм – это тезис о том, что истина является фундаментальным эпистемическим благом. Согласно Д. Притчарду, самые серьезные возражения против веритизма – это тривиальное возражение против истины и тривиальная проблема исследования. Первое гласит, что веритизм предполагает, что тривиальные истины так же важны, как и глубокие, важные истины. Второе возражение заключается в том, что веритист должен предпочесть тривиальное исследование, которое порождает множество тривиальных истин, серьезному исследованию с надеждой, но без гарантии открыть какую-то глубокую и важную истину. Оба возражения возникают из-за неспособности веритизма *prima facie*

* The writing of this paper was supported by the HSE project ‘Applied ethics’.



правильно оценить различные типы истин. Решение Причарда состоит в том, чтобы подойти к истине с точки зрения интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя, который предпочел бы весомую истину тривиальной истине. В своем комментарии я критикую предложенное решение, которое, как я показываю, основано на круговой аргументации. Так, необходимая добродетель для интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя состоит в том, что он предпочтет весомую истину тривиальной, и в то же время весомая истина выше, потому что это цель интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя. Я предлагаю другой способ обоснования веритизма в контексте двух близких возражений. Я утверждаю, что истина является фундаментальным эпистемическим благом, поскольку она делает эпистемологическую сферу практически более ценной, чем любое другое эпистемическое благо. Весомые истины предпочтительнее тривиальных, потому что практическая ценность глубоких и важных истин обычно выше. Предлагаемый подход уходит от попыток доказать эпистемическую ценность истины только в эпистемической сфере, при этом я утверждаю, что он не принуждает интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя искать истину только ради практических соображений.

Ключевые слова: истина, веритизм, ценность, добродетель, консеквенциализм, практика

The highest value of truth was taken for granted for a long time in classical epistemology. However, today many epistemologists try to downplay the central role of the truth [Elgin, 2017; Kvanvig, 2003; Toole, 2020; Williamson, 2000]. I would even add that the attack on the status of truth now goes beyond epistemology and pure academic philosophy as some people proclaim that we live in the Post-truth era or that there are alternative facts. The status of truth today, more than ever, needs to be defended. Duncan Pritchard timely suggests a defence against the certain lines of attack on the value of truth within the epistemology.

Pritchard calls the position he is going to defend *veritism* – which states that the truth is fundamentally epistemically good. In the paper, Pritchard lists several arguments for rejecting the veritism and proposes persuasive counter-arguments. According to Pritchard, none of the arguments to reject veritism are successful and I fully agree with him on that. Yet, I have a worry about the answer to the trivial truths objection and trivial inquiry problem. And I would like to lay out my worry about Pritchard's answer and then I would briefly outline an alternative solution.

The trivial truths objection and trivial inquiry problem are both based on the intuition that we should care about deep and important truths (the weighty truths) more than about the trivial truths. The supposed difficulty for veritism is that it does not distinguish between the deep and important truths and trivial truths. On this reading, any proposition which is true is as epistemically valuable as any other. Therefore, a veritist has no motivation to prefer the weighty truth to the trivial truth. Furthermore, if any truth is as



good as any other, then a veritist is committed to true belief maximisation. They must try to discover as much truth as they can. For example, counting leaves in the garden is as important as discovering the origins of the human species. And because counting leaves have much higher chances of success, this must be a preferable inquiry for the veritist. This conclusion sounds utterly counter-intuitive.

Pritchard's solution is to see truth as the goal of the intellectually virtuous inquirer. The idea is to treat the notion of an intellectually virtuous inquirer as primary and to understand the fundamental epistemic goods in terms of their goals. The intellectually virtuous inquirer does not just aim for any true proposition, they have a desire for a rich grasp of the nature of things, preferring deep and important truths over the trivial ones. Thus, they must choose the serious inquiry that potentially leads to the discovery of the weighty truths over the crude maximisation of the trivial truths. The solution, indeed, strikes into the core of the mentioned objection.

My main worry about the intellectually virtuous inquirer proposal is that it seems to be circular under closer inspection. The intellectually virtuous inquirer would prefer deep and important truth over the trivial truth, so that is why the former is more epistemically valuable than the latter. Yet, among the necessary attributes of the intellectually virtuous inquirer, one is that they prefer weighty truths over the trivial ones. Therefore, the intellectually virtuous inquirer is defined by their preference for the weighty truths over the trivial ones and, at the same time, we justify the epistemic superiority of weighty truths over the trivial ones through the concept of the intellectually virtuous inquirer.

One of the answers to the circularity concern may be that the preference for the weighty truths is not a separate virtue. Possessing a set of intellectual virtues makes one seek the weighty truths and there is no need to postulate that there is a special virtue for that. However, the preference for the weighty truths in question is independent of other virtues, whatever they are. There is a conceivable scenario in which the inquirer has almost all the intellectual virtues, except the one that they prefer the weighty truths. The inquirer in this scenario is not intellectually virtuous and they would go for truth belief maximization instead of trying to discover something important. Then again, for an inquirer to be intellectually virtuous, they need to prefer weighty truths to trivial truths and the superiority of the deep and important truths over trivial truths is established through the goals of the intellectually virtuous inquirer. Hence, we define one in terms of another and vice versa.

If Pritchard has a satisfying reply to the circular argument, then I would admit that he has successfully defended veritism from all the objections he mentioned. In the unlikely case that he did not, I have my modest proposal on how to save veritism. The first step I propose, to defend veritism, is to reconsider the justification of the fundamental epistemic



value of truth solely within the epistemic realm. Because, if we measure the epistemic value of truth only in relation to other epistemic goods, it seems that we are doomed to go the full circle in the end. The more promising way, I believe, is to define the value of truth in something that is not epistemic and then to explain how all other epistemic goods depend on that.

The best candidate I can think of, to substantiate the fundamental value of truth and, accordingly, the value of the epistemic, is the practical value. The practical value of truth has been recognised for a long time and recently has new advocates [McCormick, 2020]. By the practical value of truth, I do not mean the pragmatic nature of truth as I do not say that the belief is true if it is useful. I say that truths (true beliefs) are valuable because they tend to be practically valuable in a very broad sense. First, an agent with a true belief about the matter in question has a higher chance of success than the agent with false beliefs. For example, if two Greeks are heading to Larissa the one who has a true belief about the right direction has a higher chance to arrive at the destination than the one that has a false belief. Second, to do anything at all, an agent must have a set of basic true beliefs. For example, this set may include the following beliefs: objects do not disappear when I do not look at them; other people can understand me; people need to breathe to stay alive, etc. In other words, truth is both necessary and beneficial for practicality. The practical value of all other epistemic goods is nullified, or drastically reduced, if they are not connected to truth. For example, the justification is an epistemic good, however, the main purpose of justification is establishing some belief as true. The belief can be justified and, at the same time, untrue, but in this case, the justification has missed its point. The justified belief which is not true tends to be practically harmful as people count on them with confidence while they could get the opposite result to their expectations. Therefore, with the practical approach we keep the conceptual and axiological fundamentality of the truth for the epistemology.

The practical approach to truth allows us to explain why we should rather seek the weighty truths instead of trivial ones. The weighty truths are practically valuable more than trivial ones. The deep and important truths allow people to achieve their desired goals. The truth could be useful directly or indirectly. True beliefs are directly helpful when they are about the practice in question. It is directly helpful for a sailor to have a set of true beliefs about ocean tides. It may be indirectly helpful for a sailor to know that magic doesn't work. So, if someone would try to sell a sailor a magical artefact that allegedly tames the ocean tides, the sailor would be able to conclude that the particular magical artefact doesn't work, because magic doesn't work in general. Deep and important truths often do not have a direct application, but they help us to form directly helpful beliefs. This explains why one, even without knowing the exact



content of the beliefs in question, must rather choose the weighty truth over the trivial truth. Let's recall a scenario from Pritchard's paper (Pritchard "In Defence of Veritism" P. 30). Imagine two doors, which, behind each, lies a single true proposition. One of these propositions concerns a deep and important truth, the other proposition concerns an entirely trivial truth. If an agent has a choice and they care about the practical value of truth, they must choose the deep and important truth because the probability that it would be practically useful for them and others is higher. By the same logic, the trivial inquiry problem should be resolved. The risky inquiry that may lead to the deep and important truth with some probability is preferable to the brute maximisation of the true beliefs. As the former tend to be much more practically valuable and the latter is useless.

There is a legitimate concern that, with the acceptance of the practical approach, people (even the intellectually virtuous inquirers) would drop curiosity and seek the truth only for the sake of some practical gains. The answer to this is that the practical value of truth, in general, doesn't force us to care about the practical value of each belief or proposition. Furthermore, such calculation is highly difficult in real-life settings. Even the intellectually virtuous inquirer is not able to always predict the practical value of each truth. The intellectually virtuous inquirer is not an omnipotent being, he is supposed to have some natural limitations to the degree of his knowledge. The intellectually virtuous inquirer could not know all possible applications of all truth. However, the intellectually virtuous inquirer may very well know that the truth is practically valuable and that would motivate their virtue of curiosity. Subsequently, they would try to discover the truth just for the sake of it. It turns out that, while many of the truths would never be in use, the people who are curious about the world, and try to learn more, tend to be more successful than their incurious peers. It happens for the simple reason that the truths about the world we accumulate can always turn out to be practically valuable.

If my arguments are sound, then veritism could be substantiated on practical grounds. The one advantage of my solution over Pritchard's version is that it is conceptually simpler. The notion of the intellectually virtuous inquirer seems cumbersome and it is used to explain the value of such a basic thing as truth. That said, the concept of practical value is almost as basic as truth. I believe that my proposal goes in line with the consequentialist way of thinking, broadly construed. And I hope that would help some people to see that there is no conflict between the practical stance in epistemology and the respect for the truth.



References

- Elgin, 2017 – Elgin, C.Z. *True Enough*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, 352 pp.
- Kvanvig, 2003 – Kvanvig, J.L. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 234 pp.
- McCormick, 2020 – McCormick, M.S. “Value Beyond Truth-value: A Practical Response to Skepticism”, *Synthese*, April 2020, DOI: 10.1007/s11229-020-02590-7.
- Toole, 2020 – Toole, B. “Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology”, *Episteme*, 2020, pp. 1-19, DOI:10.1017/epi.2020.8.
- Williamson, 2000 – Williamson, T. *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, xi+340 pp.