

I IN DEFENCE OF VERITISM: RESPONSES TO MY CRITICS

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В ЗАЩИТУ ВЕРИТИЗМА: ОТВЕТ ОППОНЕНТАМ

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Эрнест Соса поставил под сомнение тезис о том, что из веритизма следует инструментальная ценность всех эпистемических благ по отношению к истине. Он приводит в пример кейс с когнитивной манипуляцией, направленной на внушение содержания Британской энциклопедии. Соса отмечает, что в обсуждаемой статье заявлено, что веритизм не следует понимать как накопление множества истинных убеждений. Я утверждаю, что веритизм совместим с интуицией, что нам важно, каким образом получена истина. Кроме того, Соса признает, что истинное убеждение, приобретенное благодаря компетенции, является разновидностью истины. В отличие от Сосы, Джон Греко критикует веритический монизм, защищая плюрализм эпистемических ценностей. Он утверждает, что, хотя тезис о концептуальном приоритете истины правомерен, тезис о ее аксиологическом приоритете является ложным, так как другие эпистемические блага находятся в неинструментальном отношении к истине. На это можно ответить, что веритизм предполагает, что мы ценим знание истины, обоснованное убеждение и прочее именно потому, что мы ценим истину. Отмечается, что веритизм, в целом, не следует отождествлять с релейбилизмом, поскольку современный релейбилизм склонен признавать ценность максимизации истинных убеждений, независимо от их содержания. Сергей Левин в своей статье утверждает, что основной тезис первоначальной статьи содержит порочный круг. Интеллектуально добродетельный исследователь определяется через предпочтение значимых истин, и в то же время мы объясняем ценность эпистемически значимых истин ссылкой на понятие интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя. В ответ на это отмечается, что из тезисов статьи не следует, что понятие интеллектуально добродетельного исследователя должно определяться таким образом. Утверждается лишь, что мотивация на достижение истины интеллектуально добродетельным исследователем имеет особый приоритет. Что касается апелляции Левина к практической ценности истины, то, строго говоря, эта ценность вообще не является эпистемической. Кроме того, значимость истины не всегда коррелирует со степенью ее практической полезности. Шейн Райан в своей статье отстаивает идею, что центральной категорией для теории познания должна быть скорее мудрость, чем истина. Вкратце, ответ состоит в том, что



это ложная дилемма. Выбор между мудростью и истиной предполагает как раз ту концепцию веритизма, которая подвергается критике в обсуждаемой статье. Мудрый человек будет признавать фундаментальную ценность истины. При этом он также будет признавать иные фундаментальные блага помимо истины.

1. I am very grateful to my commentators for taking the time to discuss my piece defending veritism. Space prevents me from responding to every critical point raised, so I will instead focus on what I take to be some of the central objections raised by each critic.

2. In his contribution, Ernest Sosa agrees with me that veritism should be endorsed, but disputes that this thesis should be understood as entailing that epistemic goodness should be understood instrumentally with regard to its relationship to truth. As he puts it, being brainwashed to believe the contents of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* might lead one to have lots of true beliefs, but it still wouldn't be an "unalloyed good thing, not even epistemically". With this point in mind, Sosa lays out an alternative way of conceiving of veritism which focusses on what he terms 'alethic affirmation', where this is concerned not just with the truth of one's judgements but also with one's competent attainment of the truth:

So, judgment turns out to be an attempt to attain truth through affirmation, but not *just* truth. Bare truth is enough for the guess of the contestant, but not for the judgment of an oncologist. Judgment aims for more than mere truth. It aims also for aptness of affirmation. But aptness of alethic affirmation *is* a kind of truth; it is truth through competence.

This is what Sosa claims is lacking when one gains a body of true beliefs via brainwashing, as although one gets to the truth, one doesn't do so via one's competences. He then sets out the main contours of the telic normativity that he has articulated in his influential work.

Let's try to unpack Sosa's argument here. The pivotal move is the *Encyclopedia Britannica* example, which is supposed to show that veritism can't be understood as demanding that all epistemic goods are to be understood instrumentally in terms of their relation to the truth (something I take to be definitional of veritism). But what exactly does this case show? Remember that I'm quite explicit in my presentation of veritism that I don't think the view should be understood as entailing that we should simply seek lots of true beliefs, regardless of whether they offer us any fundamental purchase on the nature of reality, as I claim that this trades on the faulty idea that veritism demands that all true beliefs are equally valuable. Moreover, I also claim that veritism is consistent with the intuition that it often matters how we get to the truth. If the point of the case is thus that one can maximize one's true beliefs in the wrong



kind of way, then it ought not to be a problem for how I'm construing veritism (even if it would be a problem for a construal of veritism that I reject – i.e., one on which all true beliefs are of equal value).

With that in mind, let's consider the example afresh. Imagine a variant of the case whereby one is offered the chance to *know* the contents of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* via a click of the fingers. (In fact, I think it is psychologically implausible that beliefs could be acquired in such a fashion, but let's set that to one side). That would surely be a very desirable result, both from a purely epistemic point of view and more generally (e.g., some of the knowledge acquired is bound to be practically useful). Nonetheless, there are, of course, limitations to the value of this knowledge, so acquired. One now knows lots of facts, but one might have little understanding of some of what one has learnt. Generally speaking, it's better to learn facts about, say, complex neuroscience by studying the relevant science directly as opposed to memorizing a neuroscience textbook (much less via magic, as in the current example), at least if understanding of the subject matter is one's goal. Indeed, once we move away from a crude version of veritism that is simply concerned with the maximization of true belief, then we can explain why understanding is so important in this regard, as it offers us a grip on the truth that merely assembling true beliefs on trust doesn't offer. Moreover, I also noted in this regard the importance of the distinction between epistemic value and the value of the epistemic, in that there can be a value to how one acquires the truth that goes beyond epistemic value, such as when one's cognitive achievements, like one's achievements more generally, have an ethical value that mere cognitive successes lack. Veritism, properly understood, can thus explain why we might epistemically value gaining a plethora of true beliefs, and thereby knowledge, from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* via the click of one's fingers, while also accounting for why there might be better ways of gaining such truths, from both an epistemic and a non-epistemic point of view.

Sosa's example wasn't meant to be a case of gaining knowledge via the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, however, but mere true belief, as the mechanism for the delivery of the true beliefs in his version of the example was brainwashing. The thought, I take it, is that one simply wakes up one morning and mysteriously finds oneself believing lots of true propositions. I find such a scenario even more psychologically implausible than the last. In what sense does the agent actually believe these propositions, given their mysterious appearance in his cognitive life? Wouldn't he in fact be very doubtful of them, on account of how he cannot fathom why he is even aware of these propositions? But no matter, let's grant that our agent believes all these propositions, and that they are all true. There is undoubtedly a sense in which this agent is better off, from a purely epistemic point of view, than any counterpart who lacks these true beliefs, as I'm sure Sosa would grant. His point is rather that there is something



lacking about this agent from a purely epistemic point of view. But I would entirely agree. As I explain in my own defence of veritism, it's a mistake to think that veritism is just about having lots of true beliefs, and that's all this agent has. If the goal is to get a grip on the fundamental nature of reality, then merely having lots of true beliefs, while having no inkling as to why you think they are true, is bound to be an unsatisfactory (indeed, unstable) situation. Our agent should be trying to verify these beliefs, and in the process work out why he holds them. If he can do that, however, then he is surely much better off from an epistemic point of view, and better off precisely because the further true beliefs that he is acquiring, which enable him to have knowledge of what he believes, are helping him to use those true beliefs to gain a grip on the fundamental nature of reality, something that the mysterious true beliefs by themselves weren't doing.

The crux of the matter is that Sosa's example only seems to work against veritism as I understand the view because he is implicitly construing the thesis in precisely the way that I reject – *viz.*, such that all that matters, from an epistemic perspective, is the amassing of true beliefs. I maintain that it was a mistake to think that veritism was ever committed to such a claim. It follows that Sosa and I should be on the same side (even more so than he claims), given that Sosa accepts the core veritist claim of the axiological centrality of truth. Indeed, since I can accept that how one gets to the truth can be important to epistemic evaluations both in terms of how it can help one to gain a grip on the fundamental nature of reality (epistemic value) and in terms of how there can be independent value in cognitive achievements (the value of the epistemic) I ought to have no problem accommodating the kind of telic normativity that Sosa outlines.

There is a further element here that remains outstanding, which is that Sosa explicitly rejects the idea that veritism entails that epistemic goods are instrumentally valuable relative to truth¹. He doesn't explain what he is putting in its place, however, except to say that he nonetheless endorses veritism. This is puzzling. For either Sosa is appealing to a fundamental epistemic good that is distinct from truth, in which case he isn't a veritist at all (but rather a kind of epistemic value pluralist), or else he isn't, in which case the value of epistemic goods should be cast in terms of their relationship to the truth. In fact, it seems that it is the latter

¹ Another outstanding issue concerns Sosa's response to my treatment of the swamping problem, though I think this trades on a misunderstanding of my position. In response to this problem, I maintain that knowledge that *p* will always involve more true beliefs than mere true belief that *p*. In response, Sosa argues that basic knowledge, if there is such a thing, would not be grounded in any further true beliefs. That is undoubtedly correct, but it's not relevant to the point I was making, which wasn't concerned with epistemic grounding at all. Even if it is true that basic knowledge that *p* isn't grounded in additional true beliefs, it will still be the case that in order for the subject to have this knowledge she must have additional true beliefs that needn't be present had she merely truly believed that *p*, and that's all I need to make my thesis stick.



that he actually has in mind, as he insists that the value of our cognitive achievements is concerned with truth. As he puts it in the quotation above, “aptness of alethic affirmation is a kind of truth; it is truth through competence”. If that’s right, then Sosa’s stance is not properly expressed as being opposed to the instrumental value of epistemic goods relative to truth. Instead, I take his point to be that it is a mistake to conceive of veritism as simply being about the maximization of true belief, but rather concerns a more nuanced seeking of the truth, one that can accommodate, for example, the importance of knowing or understanding the truth and not merely believing it. If that’s right, however, then Sosa is advocating for the very same kind of veritism that I was arguing we should be reclaiming, whereby a love of the truth is not to be equated with a crude desire to amass as many true beliefs as possible.

3. This last point enables us to segue nicely into John Greco’s critique, which covers similar terrain. Unlike Sosa, however, Greco’s concern is to argue against veritism (in any form) and explicitly in favour of there being a plurality of fundamental epistemic goods. Curiously, however, Greco’s axiological epistemic pluralism is meant to be compatible with the idea that there is a conceptual fundamentality to truth. The two examples he offers of fundamental epistemic goods that are distinct from truth are knowledge and justified belief. In both cases, however, he maintains that while these epistemic standings are fundamental epistemic goods in their own right, they nonetheless owe their epistemic goodness to their relationship to truth. For knowledge, this is because it has a constitutive relationship to the truth, while for justified belief it is because it has an intentional relationship to the truth. Let’s take these ideas in turn.

My own view about knowledge on this score, as articulated in my original piece, is that we care about it precisely because we care about the truth. That is, I simply think it is a mistake to think that the veritistic focus on truth entails that one must value truth *as opposed to* knowledge of the truth, as if the latter is now a distinct value that is in play². For one thing, knowing that p entails a greater purchase on the truth than merely truly believing that p , in that the former will entail further true beliefs that secure the knowledge at issue. For another, I reject in any case the idea that veritism should be understood in terms of simply counting true beliefs, as opposed to gaining a genuine grasp on the fundamental nature of reality, so it’s not as if I am advocating a picture on which the primary unit of epistemic evaluation should be true belief rather than knowledge

² Relatedly, *contra* Greco’s critical points in the final section of his piece, while I grant that intellectually virtuous inquirers put a premium on gaining knowledge (and understanding), I think that this is entirely consistent with veritism as I understand it (though not the crude version of veritism that I reject), as I maintain that they care about knowledge (and understanding) because they care about the truth (i.e., and not as a distinct epistemic value).



anyway. (Remember too that I also argue that there can be a value in how one gets to the truth that needn't thereby be an epistemic value, which would also obviously be relevant to our axiological assessments of knowledge). With all these points in mind, it is not at all clear to me why we need to appeal to such a mysterious notion of value that Greco has in mind, whereby the value of knowledge is somehow truth-related without being truth-directed. Why not simply account for the value of knowledge in terms of its relation to truth in the usual way?

This leaves me with the intentional value of justified belief. This is the idea that its epistemic goodness relates in part to how it is intentionally aimed at truth, independently of whether it has any actual relationship to the truth. Greco cites radical sceptical scenarios as support for this contention, on the grounds that the subject's beliefs in these scenarios can be nonetheless justified even though the beliefs are formed in unreliable ways. The thought, I take it, is that in such scenarios the epistemic value of the subject's justified beliefs cannot be due to an instrumental relationship to the truth, as no such relationship is manifested, but must instead be due to the intentions of the subject.

For this line of argument to fly, however, it will need to be the case that the instrumental epistemic value in play must be cast along very narrow reliabilist lines, such that the reliability in question must be manifest in those very conditions. But this is a rather puzzling restriction to place on instrumental epistemic value of the relevant kind, however, not least because it is not a restriction that even the most ardent reliabilists would endorse, let alone epistemologists of a more internalist bent. For example, one prominent reliabilist line seeks to explain the epistemic value of justified beliefs in radical sceptical scenarios by appeal to such considerations as the use of belief-forming methods that are reliable in normal worlds³. If that story is available to reliabilism in this regard, then why can't it be similarly available to veritism?

In any case, recall that one of my main theses was that we should be resisting the temptation to align veritism with reliabilism, as the contemporary reliabilist version of veritism is but one rendering of this axiological thesis (and not a very plausible one at that, given that contemporary reliabilism has tended to embrace the idea of true belief maximisation). In particular, in saying that the epistemic value of justified belief should be understood instrumentally in terms of its relation to the truth, one is not thereby committed to this relationship being understood along reliabilist lines (such that the justification is in virtue of a reliable belief-forming process). The more general point is rather that one cares about justification because one cares about the truth, and not because the former is a distinct epistemic value. Curiously, however, it seems that the kind of epistemic value that Greco has in mind for justification is precisely of this kind, as it is a valuing that is directed at the truth. Of course, from

³ See, for example, Goldman [1986].



our external perspective we can recognise that the subject's beliefs are not latching onto the world at all, but we also recognise that from the subject's perspective they are doing the best they can from an epistemic point of view, which means that they are appropriately endeavouring to form true beliefs. The point is that so long as we don't saddle veritism with contentious reliabilist presuppositions, there is nothing to prevent the proposal from accommodating the epistemic value of justification without having to appeal to an enigmatic axiological category that is somehow about the truth without being directed towards it.

4. In his critical remarks Sergei Levin focusses on two main points. The first concerns my proposal (which I merely sketched in my original piece, given space constraints) that we should unpack veritism by appealing to the truth-directed goals of the intellectual virtuous inquirer. Levin claims that the proposal is circular. He writes that "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". I think this misunderstands the dialectic of what I was proposing. I wasn't suggesting that we should define intellectually virtuous inquirers in terms of their preference for weighty truths. My claim was rather that we have an independent grip on what it is that intellectually virtuous inquirers seek, something that I claimed even the opponents of veritism should grant given that they appeal to such an idealized inquirer, and what she would value, in motivating their objections to veritism. There is thus no suggestion that we define intellectually virtuous inquirers by appeal to a prior account of epistemic value, as Levin maintains, and so the circularity objection doesn't hold water.

Levin's other main point is to contend that we should be aiming to understand the fundamental value of truth, and thereby account for epistemic value, by appeal to its practical value. Note that this isn't really an account of epistemic value at all, strictly speaking, since the claim in play is that the epistemic good really collapses into a kind of prudential good, and hence that any agent who did value the truth for its own sake would be making an error (much as the miser makes an error in valuing money for its own sake). Accordingly, for Levin intellectually virtuous subjects, who do value truth for its own sake, are simply confused, and hence can hardly be considered intellectual exemplars. His approach is thus radically different to my own.

The radical nature of Levin's proposal can be further brought out by considering how he motivates his idea by appealing to the trivial truths problem. Recall that this problem, as I present it, involves choosing between two doors that both hide a single truth, one that is weighty and important and another that is trivial. Levin argues that we can account for why we should opt for the weighty and important truth by appeal to its greater practical value. But this is to misunderstand this thought experi-



ment, at least as I was understanding it anyway, as there is no guarantee at all that the weighty and important truth will have greater practical value. Indeed, it may have no practical value at all. Perhaps it is a deep and important truth about the nature of the universe and our place in it that has no bearing on any practical question that concerns us. Nonetheless, wouldn't we want to know it, and certainly prefer to know it rather than a triviality? Conversely, notice that the trivial truth might well have practical import, as sometimes trivial truths do. The crux of the matter is that it is a mistake to suppose that what drives the trivial truths problem is really a contrast between truths with practical value and truths that lack it, as I think what really motivates this problem is the thought that intellectually virtuous subjects would value weighty and important truths, of a kind that offer a fundamental grip on the nature of reality, regardless of their practical value. In contrast, if one thinks, like Levin, that the epistemic good simply collapses to the prudential good, then there really isn't anything to explain here. The intellectually virtuous subject is simply confused in caring for truth for its own sake, and hence in seeking important truths regardless of their practical import. Moreover, *of course* one should value some truths over other truths, since it is not the truth itself that is determining what one should value in this regard, but rather the further question of whether this truth is of practical significance, and that will vary from truth to truth.

5. In his contribution, Shane Ryan makes a case for putting wisdom rather than truth at the heart of epistemology. In short, my response to Ryan is that I think that this is a false dilemma. Since I'm urging a virtue-theoretic reorientation in our thinking about epistemic value, such that the intellectual virtues occupy center-stage, it shouldn't come as a surprise at all to learn that I hold wisdom to be vitally important to epistemology, given the overarching role it plays in the virtuous life of flourishing. Moreover, recall that part of what is driving this virtue-theoretic reorientation of epistemic value is to get us to embrace a richer conception of what it is to desire the truth, one that I claim is already manifested in the motivations of the intellectually virtuous (and thus wise). Accordingly, it also shouldn't come as a surprise to learn that I hold that the manner in which we should desire the truth is precisely of a kind manifested by wise agents. The choice between wisdom and truth that Ryan poses thus trades on precisely the kind of parochial conception of what it would mean to value the truth that I was explicitly rejecting, one on which, for example, to care about the truth is just to accumulate true beliefs, regardless of their content. Once we reject that conception, and opt instead for an account of the value of truth that is informed by the intellectual virtues, then one can treat truth as a fundamental epistemic good and also have wisdom at the heart of one's epistemology. In a nutshell: the truth (properly understood) is what the wise person desires.

Ryan does at one point engage with my proposal that we should opt for a richer conception of what it is to desire the truth, such that it is con-



cerned with grasping the nature of fundamental nature of reality, as opposed to merely counting truths⁴. But he is clearly wedded to the parochial conception of what it is to desire truth, such that to desire the truth is to desire all truths equally. For example, he raises the question of why adopting this more refined conception of truth that seeks a rich grasp of the nature of reality is not to replace the truth goal altogether with a distinct conception of the fundamental epistemic good. That kind of objection only makes sense, however, if one holds that the only way to understand the truth goal is in terms of an undifferentiated desire for true beliefs. My claim, in contrast, is that if we take virtue theory seriously, then we come to see that it is precisely this crude conception of the truth goal that should be rejected.

I want to make a final point about wisdom and its role in epistemology. My concern with regard to veritism is with capturing a particular kind of goodness that is specifically epistemic, of a kind exhibited by the intellectually virtuous (and thus wise) subject. I'm also quite clear, however, that this is not the only kind of goodness there is, still less is it the only kind of goodness that is relevant to the appraisal of epistemic standings. On my view, the wise person recognizes the fundamental goodness of the truth (where, recall, this is the rich conception of the truth goal, and not the parochial understanding that contemporary epistemologists suppose is the only option available). But the wise person also recognizes fundamental goods beyond truth. Relatedly, while wisdom has an epistemic value, it is also valuable in other ways, not least in terms of its ethical value on account of its essential role in a life of flourishing. This means that it is entirely compatible to hold both that the wise person treats the truth as the fundamental epistemic good and that the value of wisdom is not exhausted by the value of truth. Again, then, we find that we do not have to choose between veritism and the special value of wisdom, as in fact they can go hand-in-hand.

References

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⁴ Ryan is misled by this talk about the fundamental nature of reality into thinking that I have in mind only facts about the physical world (§5). As I've argued elsewhere, however [see Pritchard, 2021], all manner of facts can be relevant here (as proponents of virtue theory have long pointed out), which is why the concerns of the intellectually virtuous (and thus wise) extend to, for example, self-knowledge, history, literature, and even (heaven forbid!) philosophy.