

Truth as the Epistemic Goal

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Epistemologists of all persuasions tend to invoke the goal of obtaining truth and avoiding error. This goal seems to be of special importance to epistemology. No other goal is invoked as frequently as this one. No other goal is given as much weight or is treated with as much respect as this one. Here I want to explore some aspects of this theme: the theme of truth as an epistemic goal. In particular, I am interested in what role invocation of the truth-goal plays in epistemology and in the prospects for the idea that truth is the only epistemic goal.

I

I trust the reader will already have a fairly good sense of how popular the goal of truth is among epistemologists. Still, I want to provide some passages that indicate to what purpose the truth-goal is usually invoked. William Alston and Laurence Bonjour have been especially explicit on this:

[Epistemic justification] has to do with a specifically *epistemic* dimension of evaluation. Beliefs can be evaluated in different ways. One may be more or less prudent, fortunate, or faithful in holding a certain belief. Epistemic justification is different from all that. Epistemic evaluation is undertaken from what we might call "the epistemic point of view." That point of view is defined by the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs. . . . For a belief to be justified is for it, somehow, to be awarded high marks relative to that aim. . . . Any concept of epistemic justification is a concept of some condition that is desirable or commendable from the standpoint of the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity . . . (Alston 1985, 83–84)

What makes us cognitive beings at all is our capacity for belief, and the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is *truth*: We want our beliefs to correctly and accurately depict the world. . . . The basic role of justification is that of a *means* to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our objective goal. . . . If epistemic justification were not conducive to truth in this way, if finding epistemically justified beliefs did not substantially increase the likelihood of finding true ones, then epistemic justification would be irrelevant to our main cognitive goal and of dubious worth. . . . The distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification is thus its essential or internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth. It follows that one's cognitive endeavors are justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal, which means very roughly that one accepts all and only those beliefs that one has good reason to think are true. (BonJour 1985, 7–8)

Descartes sums up his Fourth Meditation with the claim that attending to what he understands clearly and distinctly will allow him “to avoid ever going wrong” and “to arrive at the truth.” Chisholm says, at one point, that believing what is justified and not believing what is not justified is the most reasonable thing to do “if I want to believe what is true and not to believe what is false.” Paul Moser characterizes epistemic justification as “essentially related to the so-called cognitive goal of truth, insofar as an individual belief is epistemically justified only if it is appropriately directed toward the goal of truth.” Richard Foley identifies the goal “of now believing those propositions that are true and now not believing those propositions that are false” as a “purely epistemic goal.” Keith Lehrer, who holds that accepting something for the purpose of attaining truth and avoiding error is a requisite to knowledge, maintains that “a concern for truth and nothing but the truth drives the engine of justification.” Talking about our desire for truth acquisition, Alvin Goldman says that “true belief is a prime determinant of intellectual value, and in particular, a critical value for justifiedness.” Ernest Sosa, who holds that knowledge requires true belief arising from intellectual virtue, characterizes an intellectual virtue as “a quality bound to help maximize one's surplus of truth over error”; he assumes “a teleological conception of intellectual virtue, the relevant end being a proper relation to the truth.” Finally, Alvin Plantinga holds that positive epistemic status (warrant) is conferred “by one's cognitive faculties working properly, or working according to the design plan insofar that segment of the design plan is aimed at producing true beliefs.”¹

These passages come from advocates of various approaches to epistemology—foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, virtue epistemology, and proper-function epistemology are all represented. No doubt there are significant difference in emphasis and detail. But our theme is clearly discernible in all of them. Truth is either explicitly referred to as a goal or aim, or it is implicitly treated as such. Moreover, it is noteworthy that most of our authors invoke the truth-goal in connection with the epistemic concept that is central to their account of knowledge: justification, clear and distinct understanding, intellectual virtue, and warrant.²

II

Let us characterize the *truth-goal*, somewhat loosely, as the goal of *believing truths and not believing falsehoods*. Using ‘*p*’ as an objectual variable ranging over propo-

sitions, we can abbreviate this, again somewhat loosely, as the goal of believing *p* if and only if *p* is true. Note that the goal has two parts, a positive part (believing truths) and a negative part (not believing falsehoods). The label “truth-goal” is less than ideal because it deemphasizes the negative part; nevertheless, I will use it for the sake of convenience.³

The truth-goal has just been characterized in terms of *belief*. This is worth emphasizing because most ordinary formulations expressing a desire for truth are in fact ambiguous. Consider “I want the truth and nothing but the truth” and “I want to obtain truth and avoid error.” Although their negative parts clearly refer to not having false beliefs, their positive parts can be interpreted as saying, “I want to *believe* the truth” or as saying “I want to *know* the truth”—the latter may even be the more natural interpretation. Commonplaces like “the search for truth” and “the pursuit of truth” are afflicted with the same ambiguity. In general, any undifferentiated “desire for truth” could refer to a desire for mere true belief or to a desire for true belief that is knowledge. So we should be careful to distinguish the truth-goal from a more-inclusive *knowledge-goal*, which might be characterized like this: It is the goal of knowing truths and not believing falsehoods. (Note that this goal differs from the truth-goal only with respect to its positive part. A negative knowledge-goal would be uninteresting; it would be the goal of not knowing falsehoods, which is trivially satisfied.) When contemporary epistemologists refer to truth as a goal or aim, they usually make it quite clear that they are referring to the truth-goal rather than to the knowledge-goal. As far as I can tell, this unambiguous preference for the truth-goal over the knowledge-goal is a relatively recent phenomenon. Earlier epistemologists, including Descartes, tended to be systematically ambiguous on this matter.⁴

The contemporary emphasis on the truth-goal raises a simple question: What about the goal of having knowledge? Isn’t epistemology the theory of knowledge? Given this, wouldn’t it be reasonable to expect that the knowledge-goal be at least as prominent in epistemology as is the goal of having true belief, maybe even more prominent? Yet, the knowledge-goal is hardly ever brought up in epistemology nowadays. Unlike invocations of the truth-goal, invocations of knowledge as a goal are pretty much absent from contemporary epistemological theorizing. Isn’t this a bit puzzling? I think the answer, in a nutshell, is this: Invocation of the truth-goal serves primarily a theoretical need, a need that arises from the overall structure of epistemology. The knowledge-goal would not serve this need. As far as epistemology is concerned, the knowledge-goal is theoretically impotent.

Knowledge, the epistemic concept *par excellence*, is usually defined in terms of belief, truth, and some other epistemic concept, say, justification: *S* knows *p* iff *p* is true, *S* believes *p*, and *S* is justified in believing *p* in a manner that meets a suitable anti-Gettier condition.⁵ Belief and truth, although fundamental to epistemology, are not themselves epistemic concepts. They are the nonepistemic ingredients in knowledge. This means that epistemology is not responsible for them; that is, as far as epistemology is concerned, belief and truth are *given* and can be invoked to account for epistemic concepts. The distinctly epistemic ingredient in knowledge is justification: the concept of *S*’s *being justified* in believing *p* (or alternatively, the concept of a belief’s being justified for *S*). Epistemology is certainly responsible for this concept. Indeed, once an account of knowledge is at hand, the task of epistemology

pretty much reduces to the task of giving a theory of justification. Eventually, such a theory should do two things: (1) It should give some account of the nature of justification, of what it is for a belief to be justified; and (2) it should offer principles of justification, principles that specify the conditions under which beliefs of one sort or another are justified. Such a theory may to some extent relate justification to other epistemic concepts. However, it is usually held that, at some point, the theory of justification has to “break out of the circle” of epistemic concepts and provide a nonepistemic “anchor” for justification by connecting it in some significant manner with nonepistemic concepts.

It is not hard to see how the truth-goal fits into this picture. It promises to provide a connection between the concept of justification and the concept of true belief, tying together the different ingredients of knowledge. Most of the passages quoted earlier seem designed to do just that; they invoke the truth-goal as a way of connecting justification (or some other epistemic concept that plays a similar role in the author’s preferred account of knowledge) to the nonepistemic concept of truth. Why is truth typically cast as a *goal* when this connection is made? Alston provides the reason. It is generally agreed that being justified is an evaluative concept of some sort: To say that believing *p* is justified or unjustified is to evaluate believing *p*, in some sense, as a good thing or as bad thing, as having some positive status or some negative status. The suggestion is that this type of evaluation, epistemic evaluation, is most naturally understood along broadly teleological lines, as evaluating beliefs relative to the standard, or goal, of believing truth and avoiding error. This may not be a huge step toward a theory of justification—the very schematic idea of a belief’s being a “good” thing “relative” to the truth-goal has to be filled in—still, it may be an important step.

Although knowledge is certainly no less desirable than true belief, the knowledge-goal is at a disadvantage here because it does not fit into this picture in any helpful manner. Invoking the knowledge-goal would insert the concept of knowledge right into the specification of the goal, which would then no longer provide an independent anchor for understanding epistemic concepts. In particular, any attempt to understand justification relative to the knowledge-goal would invert the explanatory direction and would make the whole approach circular and entirely unilluminating. After all, knowledge was supposed to be explained in terms of justification and not the other way round. This does not mean that it is wrong in general to talk of knowledge as a goal, nor does it mean that epistemologists do not desire to have knowledge. However, it does mean that it is bad epistemology to invoke the knowledge-goal as part of the theory of knowledge because it is quite useless for theoretical purposes: The knowledge-goal has no theoretical role to play *within* the theory of knowledge.

It is tempting to describe the resulting picture of epistemology by drawing an analogy to ethics. Epistemology treats justified belief somewhat like ethics treats right action: Holding a justified belief is like holding a belief in the right kind of way. Truth is treated in analogy to *the good*—truth is, as it were, the good as far as epistemology is concerned. Note that knowledge does not show up as a goal here at all. Knowledge is just the state of having reached the truth-goal in the right kind of way. This picture presents the truth-goal as *the epistemic goal*, meaning that, for the purposes

of epistemological theorizing, the truth-goal is to be treated as an ultimate goal and as the only ultimate goal. Justification is to be explained somehow by relating it to the truth goal; hence, it is not an ultimate epistemic goal. Knowledge is not a goal at all as far as epistemology is concerned; it is not an epistemic goal.⁶ This picture, the picture of truth as *the* epistemic goal, reflects the intuition that epistemic concerns are, at the bottom, all about truth. Whether it is a good picture of epistemology would seem to depend in large part on whether the truth-goal can really play the part assigned to it.

III

Do we have the truth-goal? Do we desire to believe truths and not to believe falsehoods? A worry that might arise here is that we desire knowledge rather than mere true belief. In response, one can point out that the truth-goal is *contained* in the knowledge-goal and that *having* the truth-goal in this sense is sufficient for the theoretical purposes for which the truth-goal is needed in epistemology.⁷ Another worry might be that we do not usually desire truth for its own sake; rather, we usually desire it because we think that having true beliefs will increase our chances of satisfying our other desires. This seems plausible enough. However, the view that truth is the epistemic goal does not say that we desire truth for its own sake. It says that any further goals for the sake of which we might desire truth must fall outside the domain of epistemology. Such further goals will be practical goals or ethical goals—goals that do not contribute anything of theoretical relevance to epistemology as such.

But there is a more serious worry. Consider again the goal-oriented approach to justification, that is, the idea, roughly expressed in (G) below, that the concept of justification is to be understood as involving an evaluation of beliefs relative to the truth-goal. Is this approach committed to the desire-thesis (D)?

- (G) S's being justified/unjustified in believing *p* somehow amounts to S's believing *p* being a good/bad thing relative to the truth-goal;
- (D) S cannot be justified/unjustified in believing anything at any time, unless S desires believing truths and not believing falsehoods at that time.⁸

Note first, if the relevant desire is construed as a *conscious* desire, (D) is obviously absurd. Although most of us probably do have conscious desires for truth at some times (much like we sometimes have conscious desires for ripe bananas) such desires come and go. Yet, our beliefs are surely justified/unjustified even at times when we are not conscious of any desire for truth. So the relevant desire has to be a *standing* desire, one that we have even when we are not aware of it, maybe a subconscious desire. Taken this way, (D) is not obviously absurd. But it is still worrisome. The claim that all of "us" (all those capable of having knowledge) have such a standing desire for truth appears to be a somewhat daring empirical claim about human psychology—a claim not well supported by empirical evidence. Relevant evidence may become available some day. When scientists finally decode magnetic resonance

images from peoples' brains, will they find that everyone has I WANT TRUTH; I DON'T WANT FALSEHOOD in their "desire box"? Or is the desire for truth supposed to be an "implicit" desire? What would be evidence for the claim that everyone has such an implicit desire? Moreover, it seems there could in principle be a person who never had a standing or even an implicit desire for truth (or who lost it for a time). Wouldn't the beliefs of such a person (at that time) still be justified/unjustified? By my lights, the answer to this is yes. I think we can at least agree to this: If the goal-oriented approach to justification, (G), is committed to the desire-thesis, (D), then the picture of truth as the epistemic goal is in a certain amount of trouble. Can the approach get by without committing itself to this thesis?

One option here is to hold that we *ought* to have truth as a goal, that we ought to desire having true beliefs, or maybe better, that we ought to aim at having true beliefs; and just as a person's actions can be morally right or wrong relative to a good she ought to desire or aim at, even if she does not actually desire it, so a person's believings can be epistemically good or bad relative to a goal she ought to have, even if she does not actually have it.⁹ Of course, something will have to be said about the sense in which we *ought* to have it as a goal to have true beliefs. This could be taken as a moral "ought" or as a pragmatic "ought." It might be tempting to take it as a rational "ought." But one has to stay away from the claim that we ought to desire having true beliefs because it is rational, or reasonable, to believe that having true beliefs will help secure our other goals. These concepts of rational belief and reasonable belief appear to be epistemic concepts. But the truth-goal is supposed to help anchor epistemic concepts in nonepistemic concepts, so epistemic concepts should not be allowed to enter into the very claims that are supposed to do the anchoring. If we *did* construe the "ought" in terms of reasonability, then (G) would boil down to: S's *being justified in believing p* somehow amounts to S's believing *p* being a good thing relative to its being reasonable for S to believe that having true beliefs will help secure S's desires. A similar problem arises when it is said that we have the goal of having true beliefs qua rational beings or qua intellectual beings. Given the present context, "rational" and "intellectual" must not be spelled out in epistemic terms. An alternative option is to hold that having true beliefs and lacking false beliefs is simply *good*, ethically good.¹⁰ Being justified can then be said to be a good thing relative to the truth-goal in the sense that it is a good thing relative to the good of having true beliefs, which again allows for the possibility that we have justified beliefs even though we might not desire this good. A rather more low-key proposal is that having true beliefs is a goal for all of us in the subjunctive sense that we all *would* desire having true beliefs *were* we to reflect carefully on such matters. This is again an empirical, or quasi-empirical, claim, and one might wonder whether it gets our psychology right.

There are some influential versions of the goal-oriented approach that do take (G) to be committed to the thesis that we have to have the truth-goal in order to be justified, but only in the very extended sense that our cognitive *faculties* or *virtues* must be aimed at the truth. On Plantinga's (1988) view, for example, justification (he prefers "warrant") is a good thing relative to the state of having true beliefs in the sense that a belief's being justified is a matter of its being produced by faculties that are aimed at the truth, that is, are designed to provide us with true beliefs, and are functioning properly, that is, functioning in the way they were designed to function (in

the environment for which they were designed). Since our faculties do not have desires, the difficulties arising from (D) never come up here. However, the view has to address the intuition that our beliefs could be justified (warranted), even if the relevant faculties were not designed to aim at the truth. Moreover, if evolution designed our belief-forming faculties, then it is unlikely that they were designed to provide us with true beliefs. It is more likely that they were designed to provide our genes with instruments for successful reproduction; and our having false beliefs may often serve our genes' purposes just as well as our having true beliefs. If one believes that our faculties were designed by God, one might still worry that they were designed to let us cope with our environment rather than to provide us with access to the truth.¹¹

Let us consider a different take on the question whether (G) is committed to the desire-thesis (D). It is far from obvious that a person's beliefs cannot be epistemically evaluated relative to a goal the person does not actually have. For epistemic evaluation to make sense, it may well be sufficient that there be "enough" people who actually have the truth-goal, enough to sustain a general practice of using concepts like justification for evaluative purposes. After all, there are various types of evaluations that evaluate objects relative to a standard but don't require that the evaluated object have the desire to satisfy the relevant standard, and, in case the object has an "owner" of some sort, don't require that its owner desires the object to satisfy the relevant standard. This is a plausible point. But where does it lead?

Here is one reaction: The point leads nowhere, for it is too concerned with evaluation in the sense of an activity or practice. The primary issue under discussion is whether, on the goal-oriented approach, S's beliefs can *be* justified or unjustified even if S lacks any desire for truth—the issue is not whether there can then be a *practice of evaluating* S's beliefs as being justified or unjustified. This can be brought out by strengthening the original worry. It could have been that all humans lacked the desire for truth. In that case, there would have been no practice of evaluating beliefs as good or bad relative to the truth-goal, for such a practice requires that there be at least some people who think that having truth is desirable. But wouldn't our beliefs still be justified/unjustified? What is needed is an *objective* account of how S's believings can be good or bad relative to the truth-goal, an account that does not make being justified and being unjustified depend on there being a practice of evaluating beliefs as good or bad. Each of the proposals mentioned earlier can be seen as presenting such an objective account.

Here is a *naturalistic* reaction to the point about evaluative practices: It has more going for it than meets the eye. Distinguish the (nonnatural) evaluative *concept* of justification from the *natural* (nonevaluative) *property*, *F*, that the concept refers to, or picks out, or supervenes on. The concept of justification as an evaluative concept exists only because we, or enough of us, engage in the practice of evaluating beliefs in epistemic terms. So (G) is indeed committed to (D), with the consequence that our beliefs wouldn't be justified, that is, wouldn't fall under the concept of justification, if no one desired having true beliefs, because there would then be no such evaluative concept for beliefs to fall under. But this consequence is not disturbing, for it does not mean that we wouldn't have knowledge in that case. Knowledge *is* true belief having natural property *F*. Knowledge also *happens to be* true belief falling under the concept of justification. This is because we, or many of us, happen to have the truth-goal; and since

beliefs having F tend to be true, we happen to desire beliefs having F , which is why we often refer to F with the goal-oriented evaluative concept of justification: The goal-oriented approach, (G), has latched on to an “accidental” feature of knowledge. On a view like this, a view that would seem to sit well with strongly naturalistic theories of knowledge, principle (G) is far less central than the picture of truth as the epistemic goal would like it to be; it governs our evaluative epistemic concepts (the concept of justification and its relatives) but does not get at the nature of knowledge.

IV

Let us take a closer look at the truth-goal itself. It is the two-part goal of *believing what is true* and *not believing what is false*. It is said sometimes that the goal has to have both parts because taken separately they could be “trivialized”: Believing everything would trivially satisfy the positive part; believing nothing would trivially satisfy the negative part. This strikes me as a curious consideration. Surely, believing everything is humanly impossible; it may even be impossible *tout court*, for it involves believing explicitly contradictory propositions. Moreover, I find even believing three things very hard, when one of them is, say, the proposition that I have no head. Although believing nothing is not quite as impossible as believing everything, those of us who are actually able to have beliefs (those of us who are not brain-dead, who are not fetuses, who are not trees) will not find it much easier. In any case, it is not clear what the consideration is supposed to show. It could be meant to show that we have, or are more likely to have, the two-part goal rather than just one of the subgoals, say, the goal of believing what is true, because we realize (implicitly?) that the latter goal is best pursued by a strategy that would make things “too easy” on us, thereby devaluing the goal. Since it is so obvious that the “strategy” to believe everything is extremely hard to implement, this reasoning seems rather farfetched; it assumes that we are wildly confused about which things are easy for us to do. Maybe the idea is that we do not have just the goal of believing what is true because we (implicitly) realize that the strategy that would *guarantee* reaching that goal (the strategy to believe everything) would, if we could implement it, lead us toward a state we do not want to be in. However, this presupposes that we already have the goal of not having false beliefs. It is hard to find much merit in the point about trivialization.

The goal of believing what is true and not believing what is false is rather indefinite. An advocate of the idea that truth is the epistemic goal may want to be a bit more precise about what the truth-goal looks like, especially with respect to the question of how much truth and how little falsehood is being aimed at here. The most straightforward proposal for making the goal more precise is to interpret the *content* of the goal as a universal generalization:

- (T) For all propositions p , if p is true then S believes p , and S believes p only if p is true.

Competitors to (T) are typically advanced on the grounds that they are more plausibly ascribed to us than a goal with (T) as content. Such plausibility considerations

are, of course, relevant. However, in the present context, the first question to ask is whether the competing goal can play the part assigned to the epistemic goal, that is, whether it can serve the need of the goal-oriented approach to justification characterized by principle (G) from the previous section. If not, plausibility considerations become irrelevant.

One might object to (T) on the grounds that its positive part is easily seen to be crazy because there are infinitely many truths. Let us restrict p in (T) to propositions that can in principle be grasped by S —no harm can come from that, and it assuages worries about infinity. One might still think that the positive part makes for too ambitious a goal. Adapting a suggestion from Chisholm (1977, 14), let us try to restrict (T) to those propositions that S *considers*. But the resulting goal would be too narrow to serve in (G): Issues of justification reach beyond what we consider. We can have justification for propositions we do not believe and have never considered. More important, we have acquired many of our beliefs willy-nilly, without ever considering the propositions involved. Surely, our willy-nilly acquired beliefs can be justified or unjustified. The restriction would unhinge the idea that being justified can be understood as a good thing relative to the truth-goal. Maybe it will improve matters to go subjunctive—to formulate the goal as the goal to be such that, for every p , if one were to consider p , one would believe p if and only if p is true. This is more promising, but it may still be too narrow. You may be justified in holding beliefs which, on consideration, you would reject on bad grounds, say, because considering things tends to bring out the raving skeptic in you. It would then be a bad thing, relative to the subjunctivized goal, for you to hold such beliefs, even though intuitively you are justified in holding them. It is suggested sometimes that (T) is implausible because we simply are not interested in all those truths; that it should be restricted to propositions that are at least to some extent *important* to S .¹² It is easy to see that the resulting goal will not do at all for (G). The goal of having all and only important true beliefs is, again, too narrow because even our most unimportant beliefs can be justified or unjustified. Alston (1985, 83–84) proposes the goal of maximizing truth and minimizing falsehood in a large body of beliefs. This, too, may have a flaw. Take the admittedly unlikely case of someone who has a large body of true beliefs without having any false beliefs. Given Alston's goal, one may wonder how a person could possess justification for an additional truth that she does not believe. After all, adding a further truth to her body of beliefs will not improve the already perfect truth-ratio.

The first Chisholmian goal and the goal of believing important truths are clearly too narrow to play the role the truth-goal is supposed to play on the goal-oriented approach to justification. The other two candidates, Alston's goal and the subjunctive Chisholmian goal, are much more suitable, but they are somewhat problematic. Moreover, once (T) is restricted to propositions that S can grasp in principle, the resulting truth-goal is not subject to the worry that, given our finite nature, it is absolutely impossible for us to reach. No doubt, it is extremely unlikely that anyone of us could ever reach the state described by (T). But then, the states described by the suggested alternatives are also incredibly hard to reach.¹³ I would say that the discussed alternatives should not keep an advocate of the view that truth is the epistemic goal from holding out for (T) as the content of the truth-goal, if he feels the need for a precise characterization of the goal.

Of course, there is still the issue whether the goal of believing all and only graspable truths can plausibly be attributed to us. For one thing, the goal seems too precise. It seems more plausible to think that people have an indefinite goal, like *having true beliefs*. On the other hand, those of us who have the indefinite goal may be said to “implicitly” have the precise goal too. Maybe quite a few of us are implicitly committed to high ideals, to goals we realize, or could easily come to realize, are practically impossible to reach. There may also be something to the thought that we would like to be *omniscient*, that we would like to know all that can be known and not make any mistakes. A desire for omniscience could be said to carry with it the goal of believing all and only (graspable) truths. Many of us may have some such goal, but it is daring to claim that all of us have at least one such goal. Of course, as I pointed out in the previous section, the goal-oriented approach to justification may get by without the thesis that we actually desire truth. There is no need to rehearse the available options. One additional point deserves mention though. The important-truth-goal could be called on for help along the following lines (cf. Foley 1993, 17): We have the goal of believing all and only truths that are important to us. We realize (implicitly, on reflection) that pretty much any truth could become at least a bit important to us and might be needed without there being time for engaging in research. This leads us (would lead us on reflection) to adopt the goal of believing all and only graspable truths—or if not quite that, then at least some more indefinite goal in the neighborhood. This kind of consideration will also be of help to the view that, although we do not have the goal of believing all and only graspable truths, we ought to have it, pragmatically speaking.

V

According to (G), the truth-goal-oriented approach to justification, having a justified belief amounts, somehow, to a good thing with respect to the truth-goal. Justification applies to beliefs one by one. The truth-goal, on the other hand, is a global goal: It is the goal of having beliefs that are true and not having beliefs that are false. How are we to understand the idea that being justified in holding a particular belief *p* is a good thing relative to this global goal? The most natural answer to this question is that having a justified belief *promotes* the truth-goal, that it is a *means* for reaching the global goal of believing what is true and not believing what is false.¹⁴

Note that having a justified belief cannot be a *causal* means for reaching the truth-goal. A person can be justified in believing *p* even if believing *p* will cause her to hold a massive amount of false beliefs later on, even if all later beliefs to which her present belief causally contributes will be false. Similarly, a person can be unjustified in believing *p* even if believing *p* will cause her to hold a massive amount of true beliefs later on, even if all later beliefs to which her present belief causally contributes will be true. Being justified in believing *p* has nothing at all to do with the causal consequences of believing *p*. More generally, it seems that being justified in believing *p* has nothing to do with what beliefs you are going to hold in the future. The truth-goal cannot be a diachronic goal if it is to play the role assigned to it in the goal-oriented approach to justification; it cannot be the goal of having beliefs that

are true and not having beliefs that are false *in the long run*—if it were, the causal consequences of our beliefs would be relevant to their epistemic status. Instead, it must be a synchronic goal: It must be the goal of *now* having beliefs that are true and *now* not having beliefs that are false.

One can see how having a *true* belief is a “means,” in a broad sense, to “reaching” the synchronic truth-goal; it is what Foley (1993, 19–20) calls a *constitutive* means. Having a true belief is part of what is involved in now having beliefs that are true and now not having beliefs that are false. But given the truth-goal-oriented approach to justification with (1) justification understood as a means to the goal and (2) the assumption that the synchronic truth-goal is *the* goal for justification to promote, it is now hard to see how justification could be anything but a constitutive means to the goal, which will make justification collapse into truth. The reason is, roughly, that with a synchronic goal only constitutive means count, and a constituent of the goal must always be a better constitutive means than a nonconstituent. (i) Assume you have a true belief *p* that is (intuitively) unjustified. The goal-oriented approach must nevertheless count believing *p* as a good thing relative to the goal—certainly as better than not believing *p* and as better than believing the negation of *p*, both of which conflict with the goal. (ii) Assume you have a false belief *p* that is (intuitively) justified. The goal-oriented approach must count believing *p* as a bad thing relative to the goal—certainly as worse than believing the negation of *p*, which would be a constitutive means to the goal. The upshot is that the goal-oriented approach will count all true beliefs as justified and will not allow justified beliefs that are false: Justification collapses into truth. Let us refer to this argument as the *reductio* argument.¹⁵

Stephen Maitzen (1995) gives an argument to the same conclusion but he makes a problematic transition from one set of issues to another. The truth-goal can be invoked at two different levels: first, to characterize the nature of justification in broadly teleological terms—this is the home of principle (G); second, to explain why we *value* justification, why we care whether our beliefs are justified—the presently relevant idea being that we care *only* because justification is a path to the truth.¹⁶ Maitzen describes the view that truth is *the* epistemic goal primarily as a monistic view about why we value justification. His argument then moves from why we value justification, on the monistic view, to what justification is, on that view: “If the nominal aim [the truth-goal] is the reason for having, or pursuing justification, then it ought to follow that beliefs are justified insofar as they serve the nominal aim and unjustified insofar as they do not” (Maitzen 1995, 870). But this transition is worrisome. I might value one thing merely as a means to getting another; it does not follow that the nature of the one reduces to the other: I might value my dog merely to keep away the neighbors, but the nature of my dog does not reduce to keeping away the neighbors. In my version, the argument does not make such a transition. It proceeds entirely in terms of considerations pertaining to what justification is according to the goal-oriented approach.

The *reductio* argument should be seen as a *reductio* of at least one of the premises entering into it. The consequence that all true beliefs are justified is absurd. The consequence that a belief cannot be justified unless it is true is very unpalatable—contemporary epistemology assumes that knowledge requires only *fallible* justification. I take the point of the argument to be a diagnostic one: Thinking about how a theory

of justification would block it should tell us something about the role it assigns to the truth-goal. Let us look at some of the options in broad outline.

I. A theory of justification might block the *reductio* argument by disconnecting the concept of justification from the concept of truth. This option completely abandons the idea that truth is an epistemic goal in the substantive sense that we are concerned with here. It holds that the truth-goal has no serious theoretical role to play in the theory of knowledge because it has no role whatsoever to play in the theory of justification—frequent invocations of the truth-goal notwithstanding. Of course, truth still plays a role in the *definition* of knowledge; it is still an epistemic goal in the meek sense in that reaching the truth is required for the possession of knowledge, but that is all there is to it. Knowledge is merely a conjunctive state combining two independent goods: truth and justification. There cannot be any account of what ties these goods together because there is no explanatory connection between them: Possessing justification cannot be understood as being a good thing relative to the goal of having true beliefs. The position is unsatisfying and hard to sustain for any length of time. Having characterized justification without any reference to truth, we will feel the urge to add: “We hope . . . that the marks of *evidence* will also be marks of *truth*” (Chisholm 1957, 38), and soon we will find ourselves asking: “What is it about evidence, or justification, that makes us cling to this hope?”

II. A theory of justification might want to block the *reductio* argument by setting up a second goal for justification to promote. This option abandons the view that the truth-goal is *the* epistemic goal but retains the idea that the goal plays an essential role in the theory of justification. As on the original picture, having a justified true belief is interpreted as the state of having reached the truth-goal in the right sort of way. But *believing in the right sort of way* is now regarded as an autonomous part of the overall epistemic goal whose other part is the truth-goal. Possessing justification is understood as a good thing relative to two goals, neither one being merely a means to the other.¹⁷ Such a double-goal view is vulnerable to the objection that it addresses only half of the *reductio* argument. It does block the absurd result that all true beliefs are justified, which was the conclusion of part (i) of the argument: holding a true belief may now *fail* to be a good thing relative to the overall epistemic goal because a belief that has reached the truth may be wanting with respect to the other subgoal. But part (ii) of the argument still goes through because justification is still required to promote the truth-goal: Holding a false belief must be a bad thing relative to the overall goal because it conflicts with one of its subgoals. So the unpalatable consequence that there is no fallible justification is still with us.

This is not the last word, however. So far, I have paid little attention to the point that an adequate definition of knowledge requires not only that S have a justified true belief, but also that S's justification meet a suitable anti-Gettier condition—a condition that makes the definition immune to the sort of examples originally produced by Gettier (1963). Let us refer to justification that meets such a condition as *justification⁺*: Justification⁺ is whatever turns true belief into knowledge. Now, it may be that none of the anti-Gettier conditions that have been proposed is fully successful. Still, the work that has been done in this area strongly suggests that any successful condition will have the following feature: A belief cannot meet the condition unless the belief is true.¹⁸ Assuming this to be correct, it follows trivially that justification⁺

will not allow for fallibly justified⁺ belief. One might then try to defend position (II) in the following way: The “unpalatable consequence” is not so unpalatable after all; on the contrary, part (ii) of the *reductio* argument merely shows that the concept of justification under consideration is the concept of justification⁺, the concept that turns true belief into knowledge, which had better be infallible. Fair enough. However, the defense has an unpalatable consequence of its own. Remember that any epistemic concept one might want to employ in the theory of knowledge was supposed to be anchored in the truth-goal. Consider now the *second* goal that justification, or rather, justification⁺, is supposed to promote. Surely, it must be specified in epistemic terms: “Believing in the right sort of way” must amount to something along the lines of *believing in accordance with the evidence*, *believing reasonably*, and so on. But as soon as we connect, say, the concept of evidence to the truth-goal, and be it only partially, we can run the *reductio* argument on this concept, with the unpalatable consequence that beliefs that are in accordance with the evidence cannot be false. What now? The response that this merely proves evidence to be evidence⁺, the concept that turns true belief into knowledge, would seem to imply that the concept of evidence, which was supposed to specify the subgoal to be served by justification⁺, already coincides with the concept of justification⁺. (Alternatively, it will send us off in search for the next epistemic concept, the one that specifies the second goal that is supposed to be served by evidence⁺; and off we go.) The upshot is that a theory of the second goal of justification⁺ (say, the theory of evidence) cannot anchor evidence in the truth-goal. It cannot say that believing in accordance with the evidence is a good thing with respect to the goal of having true beliefs. The justification⁺ defense merely turns position (II) into a notational variant of position (I).

III. A theory of justification might want to reconceive the relation between justification and the truth-goal. The idea is to give an account of “being justified is a good thing relative to the truth-goal” that applies to individual beliefs but does not boil down to the claim that being justified is a constitutive means to reaching the truth-goal. The hope is to block the *reductio* argument, without discarding the view that the truth-goal plays a crucial role in the theory of justification and without setting up an independent epistemic goal.

Those who favor “internalist” approaches to the theory of justification may want to follow Chisholm and construe the connection between justification and truth as a “rational” connection:

If I want to believe what is true and not to believe what is false, then the most reasonable thing for me *to do* is to believe what is justified and not to believe what is not justified. (Chisholm 1982, 4)¹⁹

But in what sense of “reasonable” is this the reasonable thing *to do*? Certainly not in the sense that (1) it is the best means to reaching the truth-goal, for this answer would take us back to the *reductio* argument. The concept of reasonableness that Chisholm uses here to connect justification with truth is a bit like the concept of reasonable action and a bit like the concept of reasonable belief, but not quite like either one. Let us try to spell out this concept in terms of the ordinary epistemic concept “it is reasonable to believe that . . .”. This yields a second answer to the question raised above: If one has the truth-goal, then having a justified belief is the reasonable thing

to do in the sense that (2) it is *epistemically reasonable* to believe that having a justified belief is the best means to reaching the truth-goal. Note first that this answer has a curious feature. If the *reductio* argument is *successful*, then the answer is certainly correct. Sure enough, it is reasonable to believe that having a true belief is the best *means* to reaching the truth-goal—it is a constitutive means. However, the answer is supposed to block the argument by *not* construing justification merely as a means to truth. Assuming the answer is successful in thus blocking the argument: Why is it then still reasonable to believe that having a justified belief is the best means to reaching the truth-goal? This question, I think, can have no answer. One should also worry about the epistemic concept of reasonable belief that is used in answer (2) to connect justification with the truth-goal. If this concept is not itself connected with the truth-goal, then the present position abandons the view that truth is the epistemic goal with respect to the “connecting” concept of reasonable belief. If, on the other hand, one connects this concept with the truth-goal by replacing the word “justified” with the word “reasonable” in Chisholm’s principle (quoted above), the result appears to be trivial. However, the deepest worry about (2) seems to me to be this: (2) is supposed to tell us in what sense having a justified belief is a good thing relative to the truth-goal; yet, I find it difficult to see how it manages to convey more than that *it is reasonable to believe* that having a justified belief is a good thing relative to the truth-goal. An alternative rendering of Chisholm’s principle in terms of the epistemic concept of reasonable belief would go like this: (3) *If I have the truth-goal, then, for every p , it is reasonable for me to believe p , if I am justified in believing p , and it is reasonable for me not to believe p , if I am not justified in believing p .* But the consequent of this conditional is trivially true—it is true even if it is my goal to believe all and only falsehoods.

Maybe there simply is no answer to the question in what sense believing what is justified and not believing what is unjustified is “the reasonable thing to do” if one has the truth-goal. Say the concept that forges the rational connection between epistemic concepts and the truth-goal cannot be circumscribed in terms of (other) epistemic concepts. If this is the view, then one has to decide whether the connecting rationality-concept is nevertheless supposed to be an epistemic concept of sorts. If it is, then the resulting position would seem to abandon the idea that truth is the epistemic goal, for the concept that forges the rational connection between the truth-goal and all other epistemic concepts will not itself be anchored in the truth-goal (self-anchoring principles will end up in trivialities to the effect that it is rational to have rational beliefs—adding an invocation of the truth-goal to such a principle merely adds an idle wheel). If, on the other hand, the connecting rationality-concept is regarded as a nonepistemic concept, then one can indeed block the *reductio* argument without abandoning the view that truth is the epistemic goal, but at the price that the “rational” connection between justification and the truth-goal becomes rather mysterious.

Let us take a look at how an “externalist” approach to the theory of justification will block the *reductio* argument. I will focus on a simple form of *process reliabilism*. It is natural to expect that a reliabilist will be disinclined to abandon the idea that the truth-goal plays a crucial role in the theory of justification, and that he will be equally disinclined to set up another epistemic goal besides truth. Indeed, reliabilism blocks the *reductio* argument with its account of epistemic goodness: Being justified in

believing p is a good thing relative to the truth-goal because a justified belief is one that is reliably produced, that is, produced by a belief-forming process, or mechanism, that produces mostly true beliefs.²⁰ Not surprisingly, this looks like a promising way of handling the truth-goal. It seems to avoid construing the epistemic goodness of an individual justified belief merely as a constitutive means to the truth-goal; and it seems to take seriously the idea that truth is the epistemic goal. However, as Maitzen (1995, 873–74) points out, it is not obvious that reliabilism really is faithful to the truth-goal. Isn't it, rather, that the truth-goal is being replaced by the goal of having reliably produced beliefs? After all, reliabilism counts a true belief that is not reliably produced as one that is bad relative to the goal, and it counts a false belief that is reliably produced as one that is good relative to the goal. It seems to follow that "the goal" referred to here cannot be the goal of having true beliefs; it must be the goal of having beliefs that are reliably produced. If so, then the reliabilist way of blocking the *reductio* argument abandons the view that the truth-goal is the epistemic goal. The conclusion of this line of reasoning is a bit surprising. One would have thought that, if the truth-goal plays a serious role anywhere in epistemology, then it does in reliabilism. I take it that the natural response to this charge, the charge that reliabilism has traded the truth-goal for the goal of having reliably produced beliefs, is this: No such trade has taken place because "having reliably produced beliefs" does not refer to a goal other than the truth-goal; it is just another name for (part of) the truth-goal. Let us see whether this response is successful.

Read "G" as an operator saying something like "it is my goal that," or "I want it to be the case that." We should distinguish between the following

- (1) $G[(\forall p) (Bp \leftrightarrow Tp)]$
- (2) $(\forall p) [G(Bp \leftrightarrow Tp)]$

The first expresses the truth-goal—a goal you could have. The second ascribes to you a vast number of goals, not all of which you can have. It makes a false claim, saying that every proposition (you can grasp) is such that you have a *de re* desire about it to the effect that you want to believe it if and only if it is true. Obviously, you can desire the goal-state specified in (1) without desiring each one of the goal-states specified by the *de re* instances of (2). Similarly, you may be committed to the goal expressed by (1)—it does not follow from this that each of the *de re* instances of (2) is such that you are committed to it. Reliabilism sees justification in this light. It counts an individual true belief as unjustified, when its production history implies that (1) will be ill served if the believer should go on forming beliefs like that; and it counts an individual false belief as justified if its production history implies that (1) will be well served if the believer should go on forming beliefs like that. So reliabilism regards justification as serving the greater good while being prepared to forego serving individual instances of (2). Since reliabilist justification promotes (1), it promotes the truth-goal. Since commitment to (1) does not carry with it commitment to each instance of (2), it does not follow that reliabilist justification is not committed to the truth-goal if it does not promote each instance of (2).

Now, what does it mean to have a reliably produced belief? Roughly, it means that one's belief is produced by a belief-forming process M such that, in most cases,

if a belief is produced by M , then the belief is true. Take a “family” of your beliefs to be the beliefs produced by the same process. A reliably produced belief is a member of a family most of whose members satisfy “ $(Bp \rightarrow Tp) \ \& \ Bp$ ” for any proposition p they are concerned with. To say that an individual belief is reliably produced amounts to saying that one half of goal (1), namely $(\forall p) (Bp \rightarrow Tp)$, is being collectively looked after by the family to which the belief belongs, though not necessarily by the belief itself. So reliabilism does not abandon the truth-goal for the goal of having reliably produced beliefs; on the contrary, to say that a belief is reliably produced (justified) *is* to talk about half of the truth-goal and to say that it is being promoted.²¹ However, this does not really work. The reliability of a process that is presently producing a particular belief depends (almost) exclusively on how successful the process’s past offspring has been and on how successful the process’s future offspring will be. So, on the above account, reliabilism has to maintain that the truth-goal is the diachronic goal of having true beliefs in the long run, where the “long run” is meant to include the past as well as the future. This is troubling. It is very implausible to hold that whether I am now justified in believing p depends partly, or wholly, on the truth values of my future beliefs. In particular, the diachronic goal will allow that the truth values of beliefs that are the causal consequences of my present beliefs bear significantly on whether my present beliefs are justified. This is quite unacceptable. The diachronic truth-goal has to go.

The obvious goal to put in place of the diachronic truth-goal is a *subjunctive truth-goal*: For every p , if I were to believe p , then p would be true, and if p were true, then I would believe p . To make things fit together, reliability must also be spelled out in subjunctive terms; this is an intuitively more plausible understanding of reliability anyway. Take a subjunctive family of your beliefs to be the beliefs a given process would produce, if it were to produce a large number of beliefs. A reliably produced belief is a member of a subjunctive family most of whose members satisfy “ $(Bp \rightarrow Tp) \ \& \ Bp$ ”, for any p they would be concerned with, where you should now read “ \rightarrow ” as a subjunctive arrow. To talk of an individual reliably produced belief amounts to saying that the subjunctive truth-goal is being promoted collectively by the belief’s subjunctive family. So where does this version of reliabilism stand with respect to the charge of truth-goal trading? It has indeed adopted a new goal, the subjunctive truth-goal. But it has not abandoned the old goal, for the old goal is contained in the new one. No real trade has taken place. Is the subjunctive truth-goal an ad hoc device? I do not think so. It strikes me as a serious contender for the part of the epistemic goal—maybe a genuine improvement over the old truth-goal. Insofar as we have a desire for having true beliefs, that desire may well be for something stronger than happy-go-lucky truth.²²

Notes

1. See Descartes (1641, 1984), AT VII 62; Chisholm (1982), 4; Moser (1985), 4; Foley (1993), 19; Lehrer (1990), 112; Goldman (1986), 98; Sosa (1985, 1991), 225; and Plantinga (1988), 39. I should point out that Chisholm’s attitude toward the goal of truth has varied quite a bit; cf., e.g., Chisholm (1977), 14 and (1986), 90–91. Moser too puts things somewhat differently in another work; cf. Moser (1989), 42 and chap. 5.

2. I will not pay much attention to the minority view that believing truth and avoiding error might be a *duty* rather than a goal—an “objective duty” to truth itself. Richard Feldman

discusses it briefly and identifies one of its main flaws: if p is false but all our evidence indicates that p is true, we do not have a duty to refrain from believing p ; if anything, we have a duty to believe p and vice versa; see Feldman (1988), 245–47.

3. I assume that authors who do not make explicit mention of the negative part still take it to be included in the goal. If one acknowledges propositions that lack truth value (e.g., the proposition that Jones is bald, where Jones's skull exhibits a borderline case of baldness), then one will have to distinguish two versions of the negative part: (a) the goal of not believing falsehoods, which is silent about propositions that lack truth value; and (b) the goal of not believing untruths, which treats propositions that lack truth value just like false ones. Are these of equal importance to epistemology or is one to be preferred? Here I will suppress this issues by assuming/pretending that all propositions are either true or false.

4. When Descartes says he has learned “what to do to arrive at the truth” (1641, 1984), AT VII 62, does he mean arrive at knowledge of the truth or at true belief? It is hard to tell. William James's well-known commandment—“*We must know the truth: and we must avoid error*” (1911), 17—turns out to be ambiguous too, for right away he reformulates it as: “Believe truth! Shun error!” Of course, here the ambiguity is between commandments or duties rather than between goals.

5. Let us not worry for now about the intricacies of handling Gettier cases. And let us not worry too much about the choice of *justification* in the third condition. Various alternative epistemic concepts might be used: reason, evidence, rationality, warrant, intellectual virtue, and others. To simplify things, let us take justification as a representative of this extended family of epistemic concepts (other than knowledge and its equivalents).

6. Since simplicity, explanatory power, and other features that are deemed desirable in scientific theories, do not show up as independent elements in the account of knowledge, they are not even prima-facie candidates for being ultimate epistemic goals. They can be relevant only insofar as they are ingredients of justification, only insofar as they help make believing the theory a good thing relative to the truth-goal.

7. Could one desire knowledge and, not being aware that knowledge requires truth, fail to desire truth? Would it then still be *knowledge* that one desires?

8. Compare the end of the passage from BonJour quoted in section I.

9. Locke: “He that believes, without having any Reason for believing . . . neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker . . .” (1700, 1975), IV.xvii.24. Chisholm: “Every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement—that of trying his best to bring it about that, for every proposition h that he considers, he accepts h if and only if h is true” (1977), 14. Chisholm may well have thought that the requirement of “trying one's best” is derived from the fact that we ought to have the goal to bring about the state he describes, and that we are subject to this requirement even if we do not have that goal. This view should be distinguished from another view that might underlie this well-known passage, namely that the relatively subjective duty of “trying one's best” is derived from an objective duty to truth *itself*—i.e., from the duty to accept the propositions we consider if they are true—as opposed to being derived from a duty to have truth *as a goal*. See note 2 on objective duties to truth itself.

10. Russell: “As for the preference which most people . . . feel in favor of true propositions, this must be based, apparently, upon an ultimate ethical proposition: ‘It is good to believe true propositions, and bad to believe false ones.’ This proposition, it is to be hoped, is true; but if not, there is no reason to think that we do ill in believing it” (1904, 1973), 76.

11. Cf. Sosa (1993); and Descartes (1641, 1984), AT VII 82–89.

12. Compare Alston (1985, 1989), 83; Plantinga (1993), 33; and Steup (1996), 72.

13. There is a sense in which Alston's goal is easier to reach than (T). A person who has a large body of only true beliefs has reached Alston's goal but not (T). However, this is exactly the case that seemed to create a difficulty for Alston's goal. Note that it will be very hard to reach Alston's goal for a person who does have false beliefs, because adding a true belief will always improve the ratio. Since it is very hard to avoid having false beliefs, this makes Alston's goal not significantly easier to reach than (T).

14. Compare the passage from BonJour quoted in section I.

15. More or less related arguments can be found in Sartwell (1992), 172–76 (although he handles these issues rather oddly by my lights); DePaul (1993), chap. 2.4; and Maitzen (1995).

16. BonJour: “Why should we, as cognitive beings, care whether our beliefs are epistemically justified? Why is such justification something to be sought and valued? . . . The basic role of justification is that of a means to truth . . . If epistemic justification were not conducive to truth . . . [then it] would be irrelevant to our main cognitive goal and of dubious worth . . . Epistemic justification is therefore in the final analysis only an instrumental value not an intrinsic one.” (1985, 7–8).

17. Cf. DePaul (1993), 77–78.

18. Cf., e.g., Lehrer (1990), chap. 7; Moser (1989), chap. 6; and Steup (1996), 12–18. These works contain further references to the literature on the Gettier problem.

19. My italics. Later Chisholm rejects all his earlier attempts to forge a connection of any sort between justification and the truth goal; see his (1986), 90–91.

20. See Goldman (1979). I use an extremely simplified version of reliabilism. Also, I assume there is a solution to the “generality problem”—otherwise reliabilism itself will collapse justification into truth; cf. Goldman (1979), 12–13; Plantinga (1988), 24–31; Steup (1996), 165–67. A reliabilist account of justification will have to be supplemented with a “no undermining *evidence*”-condition; cf. Goldman (1979), 18–20. If this concept of evidence is not anchored in the truth-goal, reliabilism will end up as a version of position (II) rather than (III).

21. Of course, the other part of (1) is also promoted. But the *concept* of a reliable process has to do with something of this form “ $Bp \rightarrow Tp$ ” rather than that “ $Tp \rightarrow Bp$.”

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