

Is Truth the Primary Epistemic Goal?

Truth Is not the Primary Epistemic Goal

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The question before us concerns the epistemic goal, standardly taken in epistemology over the past fifty years or so to be that of getting to the truth and avoiding error. In order to assess the plausibility of any answer to this question, it will be useful to begin by thinking about the question itself to make sure that it is properly understood. Asking about goals is asking about values or goods. To ask what one's goals are in, say, going to college, we inquire about the perceived values or goods that are being pursued. So the first thing to note about our question is that it asks about the values or goods that are epistemic in character.

The second point to note about the question is that it can be addressed from two quite different perspectives. One perspective is that of the theoretician. From this perspective, the question concerns what goods or values are central or primary for the theoretical task undertaken by the epistemologist, whatever that task may be. There is also another perspective, however, and that perspective is the point of view of those organisms about whose cognitive activity the epistemologist is theorizing. From this perspective, the question concerns the values or goods involved in the type of states and activities investigated by epistemologists.

It is important to keep the difference between these perspectives in mind when addressing this question, for there is no reason to assume that the answer to the question will be the same from either perspective. For example, it might be the case that truth is the primary good that defines the theoretical project of epistemology, yet it might also be the case that cognitive systems aim at a variety of values different from truth. Perhaps, for instance, they typically value well-being, or survival, or perhaps even reproductive success, with truth never playing much of a role at all.

Our question arises primarily from the perspective of the theoretical project of epistemology, and I will address the question from that point of view. We will see that the perspective of the cognitive system itself plays a role in this investigation, but only an ancillary one. In addressing the question before us I will be arguing for a

negative answer to it. I will be arguing, instead, that there is a plurality of epistemic values and goals, and that though truth is an important epistemic goal, it has no claim to being the primary such value or goal. In order to argue for this plurality view, it is important to begin with a general account of the subject matter of epistemology, for the narrower one's conception of epistemology, the easier it is to defend the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal. After explaining the appropriate domain of epistemological theorizing, I will take up the task of defending the pluralistic view.

What Is Epistemology?

Epistemology is often taken to be the theory of knowledge, but that conception is too narrow. At the most general level of characterization, epistemology is the study of certain aspects of our cognitive endeavors. In particular, it aims to investigate *successful* cognition. Within its purview, then, are various kinds of cognizing, including processes such as thinking, inquiring, and reasoning; events such as changes in one's world view or the adoption of a different perspective on things; and states such as beliefs assumptions, presuppositions, tenets, working hypotheses, and the like. Also within its purview is the variety of cognitive successes, including true beliefs and opinions, viewpoints that make sense of the course of experience, tenets that are empirically adequate, knowledge, understanding, theoretical wisdom, rational presuppositions, justified assumptions, working hypotheses likely to be true, responsible inquiry, and the like.

Two notes of caution are in order here. First, not just any kind of inquiry into kinds of cognizing and varieties of cognitive success counts as epistemology. Presumably, one can investigate these issues scientifically as well as philosophically, and I assume that they can be investigated in other ways as well (religiously, politically, morally, aesthetically, etc.). Epistemology is the result when these issues are investigated philosophically, but I will not here attempt any general characterization of the difference between philosophical and other forms of investigation.

The second point to note is that what kinds of success in cognition are relevant to epistemology is somewhat controversial. Beliefs that contribute to the well-being of the organism are successful in some sense of that term, and yet some will hold that such success is not the kind of success within the purview of the discipline of epistemology. Notice that success of a practical sort will advert to the causal consequences of holding the beliefs in question, and a common view is that epistemology is more concerned with intrinsic features of cognition, the kind reflected in talk of inquiry for its own sake. When we engage in inquiry for its own sake, successful results will partake of a kind of success that is independent of any causal contribution to well-being or other practical concerns. When epistemologists reflect on the nature of successful contribution and the extent to which an organism achieves it, the predominant approach has been to reflect on a kind of success that abstracts from the consequences of cognition, whether those consequences are practical, moral, religious, political, or social. I am inclined here to make a terminological restriction that what I mean by the use of "epistemology" and related terms is just this study of success which abstracts

from the consequences of cognition, but I do not wish to be understood to denigrate more pragmatic approaches that claim to be epistemological yet deny that there is any value in, or value in thinking about, inquiry for its own sake. In part, my decision to limit a discussion of epistemology to one involving reflection on success of this rather rarefied sort rests on an attempt to consider the best case available to those who defend a positive answer to the question of whether truth is the primary epistemic goal. On these pragmatic approaches, such a positive answer has nothing to recommend it, but I will ignore such approaches here.

In slogan form, my characterization of epistemology is that it is the study of purely theoretical cognitive success, where the notion of what is purely theoretical is understood as above in terms of abstraction from the causal consequences of the success in question. As already noted, I grant that this characterization has a mild stipulative dimension in that it refuses to count as epistemology certain types of pragmatic approaches to the study of successful cognition. Even with this mild stipulation, however, the point I am trying to bring across is the breadth of this conception of epistemology, breadth with ramifications for the question before us. Once we notice this breadth, we will be struck by the strong reductionist flavor of the claim that truth is the primary epistemic goal. One's first inclination should be to maintain that each independent kind of cognitive success within the purview of epistemology identifies a cognitive goal in its own right. From this viewpoint, epistemic goals include knowledge, understanding, wisdom, rationality, justification, sense-making, and empirically adequate theories in addition to getting to the truth and avoiding error. Once we have seen the variety of cognitive successes, the proper answer would seem to be that the class of epistemic goods is manifold, as wide as the class of cognitive successes. To answer otherwise would seem to engage in Procrusteanism involved in mild humor that begins with "there are two kinds of people in the world," except that this particular truncation would begin by trimming the number from two to one. Given this initial variety, how could the reductionist viewpoint be sustained?

Epistemic Values and Goals

One place to turn for a defense of the reductionist thesis is to the needs of epistemology itself. Perhaps in theorizing about cognitive success, there is a need for appeal to the goal of getting to the truth and avoiding error. I think something along these lines underlies the standard view that the epistemic goal is that of getting to the truth and avoiding error. The *Reader's Digest* condensed version of this approach goes like this: epistemology is the theory of knowledge, and knowledge includes, but is something more than, true belief. What more is required provides a connection between truth and belief. For example, it is well accepted that knowledge requires that the connection between belief and truth is *non-accidental*. Furthermore, for those who think that knowledge has a normative ingredient such as justification, rationality, responsibility, or the like, there will be a theoretical need to distinguish the sense of such terms from senses which have no place in an account of knowledge, such as practical senses. Perhaps that epistemic sense of the term should be characterized in

terms of the goal, or good, of truth itself. If so, then perhaps the best way to think of the conditions needed for knowledge in addition to belief and truth are conditions best conceived in terms of some connection to truth.

Marian David provides an account of the matter along these lines. He says:

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 belief p, and S is justified in believing p in a manner that meets a suitable anti-Gettier condition. 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. . . . 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. (David, 2001)

David here endorses several of the claims noted earlier. First, his conclusion that epistemology's task reduces to that of giving a theory of justification requires the assumption that epistemology is the theory of knowledge. So David endorses

- (1) Epistemology is the theory of knowledge.

Second, David endorses the strong claim that

- (2) The only epistemic concept in an account of knowledge is justification.

David argues for (2) by claiming that belief and truth are not epistemic concepts, though he does not explain why they are not. Perhaps he is thinking as follows. Truth is a *semantic* notion and belief a *psychological* notion. As such, they should be investigated by semanticists and psychologists, not epistemologists.

Even if we accept this explanation, David's claim is a bit strong since it ignores the condition needed to solve the Gettier problem. (2) denies that attempts to solve the Gettier problem fall within the domain of epistemology, and that claim is mistaken. This point is more important than it might seem initially to be, since David's approach to showing that truth is the primary epistemic goal requires focusing exclusively on the theory of justification. Once we alter (2) to accommodate this point about the Gettier problem, no claims about the theory of justification can establish on their own the claim that truth is the primary epistemic goal.

I want to stress that we should not overestimate this difficulty, however. One approach to the Gettier problem, the defeasibility approach, explains the condition needed to handle that problem as a function on truth and justification. The simplest example of this approach says that having knowledge requires, in addition to justified true belief, there being no true information which, if learned, would result in the person in question no longer being justified in believing the claim in question. Though complications arise for this overly simple approach,¹ the point to note here is that the central concepts in this approach – truth and justification – already appear in the

account of knowledge. If David's point can be sustained that justification is the only epistemic concept among the concepts of justification, truth, and belief, then this approach to the Gettier problem will be quite useful in the attempt to argue that truth is the primary epistemic goal by focusing on its role in the theory of justification. So even though David's account cannot succeed without some discussion of the Gettier problem, there is some hope for the idea that the Gettier problem will not force an alteration of his view that providing a theory of justification is the central task of epistemology. Perhaps David finds the defeasibility approach to the Gettier problem attractive, and it is this attraction that leads him to bypass any discussion of the Gettier problem in his defense of the claim that truth is the primary epistemic goal.

The defense of (2) is still troublesome even if we allow this explanation of why the Gettier problem does not undermine it. One problem with this explanation is that it proves too much. Justification is a property not only of beliefs but also of other things (such as actions) not within the domain of epistemology. According to the above explanation, if a concept is suitable for investigation by disciplines other than epistemology (such as semantics or psychology), then that concept is not an epistemic concept. Insofar as justification is also a property of actions, it is suitable for investigation by action theorists, a subclass among philosophers of mind. So it appears that the above defense of (2) implies that there are *no* epistemic concepts in the proper account of the nature of knowledge!

One might reply that there is a distinctive concept of justification that is at home only in epistemology, and that concepts of justification which apply to other things such as actions are simply different concepts. In this way, the concept of justification needed in an account of knowledge is at home only in epistemology and is thus the only epistemic concept in an account of knowledge.

Such a view faces serious difficulties. Consider a simple juridical example such as the O. J. Simpson case. Some who watched the case closely say that contrary to the actual finding of not guilty, the evidence justified both their position that Simpson was guilty (beyond a reasonable doubt) and a decision by the judge to send him to prison for life. This claim predicates justification of two things: the first is a position of the speaker, i.e. a belief, and the second is an action by a legal authority. On the view proposed in support of (2) above, we would need to treat this juridical pronouncement as semantically awkward, in the way it is semantically awkward to say that both sides of rivers and certain financial institutions are banks.

Let us put these difficulties aside for the moment, however, to see how (2) is supposed to take us to the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal. On this issue, David provides us with two quite different answers. His first answer appeals to the idea of supervenience:

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. (David, 2001)

This attempt to find a central place for the truth goal in epistemology is unsuccessful. The need to anchor epistemic concepts in the non-epistemic is more plausibly taken as a demand that evaluative concepts supervene on non-evaluative concepts, and there is no reason to identify truth with the supervenience base of evaluative concepts in epistemology, any more than there is reason to identify the concept of the good as the supervenience base of evaluative concepts in ethics. For example, one answer to the demand for a supervenience base is broadly empiricist: justification supervenes on experiential states and logical (or quasi-logical) relations between propositions. In this view, what *makes* a belief justified is that it stands in the right logical or quasi-logical relationship to another belief or to (the propositional content of) an experience. One may be tempted to maintain that the concept of truth will still enter into this picture when we try to characterize logical relationships, but that reply is a red herring. First, logical relationships can be characterized syntactically as well as semantically. Second, and more important, even if truth is an ingredient in our account of this supervenience base, it is not present in the manner of a *goal* or anything of the sort. To argue that because truth is needed to explain logic, it must be that a primary epistemic goal would also commit one to the view that because the concept of a sensation is necessary to explain experience, sensation itself must be a primary epistemic goal according to empiricism.

There is a particular kind of approach to the nature of justification that fits David's picture a bit better than the empiricist example. Alvin Goldman's reliabilism of 1979 begins with the same demand to break out of the circle of epistemic concepts in order to clarify the nature of justification, and the way in which Goldman prefers to break out of the circle is in terms of the concept of reliability. The central non-epistemic concept in his theory is that of the reliability of a process or method of belief formation, the percentage of times that process or method generates a true belief. Given that it is percentage of truth over error by which we favor some processes and methods over others, we might wish to characterize our theoretical preference for some processes or methods over others in terms of the goal of truth over error, thereby securing the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal.

This way of defending the claim that truth is the primary epistemic goal thus requires the subconclusion that reliabilism is the correct approach to the nature of justification, a position that is far from trouble-free.² But the particular problems one might cite for reliabilism are not the central difficulty. The deeper problem is that the question we are attempting to answer arises at a different point in epistemological inquiry than the question of the adequacy of some particular theory of justification. The question whether truth is the primary epistemic goal is a meta-epistemological question, whereas the question of the adequacy of reliabilism is not. When we ask about the primary epistemic goal, we are asking whether there is a way of defending the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal that is neutral between competing epistemological theories, and given that interpretation of the question, the approach that relies on the adequacy of a reliabilist approach in epistemology must be judged to be unsuccessful.

David seems to recognize the meta-epistemological character of the issue, for he provides another and quite different answer to the question of the relationship between justification and truth. He says:

Why is truth typically cast as a goal . . . ? 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 belief *p*, in some sense, as a good thing or as a 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. (David, 2001)

David here endorses Alston's claim that the evaluative character of justification should be understood teleologically, and this explanation of the relationship between truth and justification is a suitably meta-epistemological account in contrast to the previous account which seems to depend on the particular epistemological theory of reliabilism.

What we need to know, however, is how this point about the teleological character of justification helps to show that truth is the primary epistemic goal. David's argument proceeds by contrasting the idea that truth is the goal with the idea that knowledge is the goal:

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. (David, 2001)

David's argument thus proceeds as follows. We have already seen his claims that (1) epistemology is the theory of knowledge and (2) justification is the only epistemic concept within the theory of knowledge. These points imply that the central epistemic concepts are knowledge and justification, so the primary epistemic goal will have to be one related to these concepts. David's teleological conception of justification makes truth a contender for being the primary epistemic goal, and if the only epistemic concepts are justification and knowledge, the central competitor of the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal would be that knowledge itself is the goal. Once we see the implication from (1) and (2) to the point that the central task of epistemology is to construct a theory of justification, the knowledge goal cannot be the primary epistemic goal on pain of rendering our epistemology viciously circular. Only the truth goal can be central if our theory has any hope of adequacy, so truth must be the primary epistemic goal.

The form of argument here bears scrutiny since the particular argument in question relies on the false assumption that epistemology is the theory of knowledge.

Given this assumption, the competitor to the idea that truth is the primary epistemic goal is the idea that knowledge is also an epistemic goal. Given the more general conception of epistemology outlined earlier and the variety of cognitive successes it implies, we will need a generalization of David's argument in order to conclude that truth is the primary epistemic goal. Such a generalization could begin by allowing that any purely theoretical cognitive success is of value and hence a suitable epistemic goal. But for each such goal, it has no theoretical goal to play within the project of theorizing about it, for such an account would make the theory "circular and entirely unilluminating." Moreover, it would have to be claimed, any goal that would render a theory circular and unilluminating in this way cannot be an epistemic goal, leaving truth as the only standing candidate for that role.

So, on this view, nothing of epistemic value can be an epistemic goal. Instead, only values that fall outside the domain of cognitive successes can legitimately be cited when explaining epistemic success. It also follows from this point that truth and belief cannot themselves be epistemically valuable, for otherwise getting to the truth cannot itself be an epistemic goal.

Contrast this result with an alternative picture. For simplicity, let us grant David's claims that epistemology is the theory of knowledge and that knowledge is to be understood in terms of justified true belief plus a Gettier condition. The alternative picture holds that each element in the theory of knowledge should isolate some epistemic good (something whose value contributes to and helps explain the value of knowledge). So, for example, truth itself must be an epistemic good, implying that it has value exceeding that of mere empirical adequacy. In a similar vein, belief must be an epistemic good, implying that Pyrrhonian counsel to abandon beliefs in favor of acquiescing to the appearances cannot, in any literal sense, accord with the facts about what is important from a purely theoretical point of view. Similar points could be voiced about the other two conditions as well, and the accumulated result of these points is that if truth is an epistemic goal so are the other values just mentioned. As a result, truth is not the primary epistemic goal, but rather one among several epistemic values that have equal claim to being epistemic goals. This alternative picture strikes me as much more plausible than the idea that nothing that is epistemically valuable can itself be an epistemic goal or good.

The generalization of David's argument above has a further problem. This generalization requires that for any epistemic value *V* other than truth itself, the fundamental goal in terms of which a theory of *V* is constructed is truth itself. Once we put the view in these terms, I think it is fairly easy to see that it is false, though it may be more plausible in some parts of epistemology than in others. Perhaps, for example, it has some plausibility with respect to the value of belief itself. One might maintain that the value of belief is in some way dependent on the value of truth in that cognitive activity in general is prompted by the *desire* to get to the truth, and that belief is the result of such alethic motivation. Alternative alethic accounts are also available, ones which posit something sub-intentional as the driving force behind such activity, perhaps a need or interest or drive or perhaps even an instinct to get to the truth. One might even hold that it is the *function* of cognition to get to the truth and avoid error, whether the organism in question can be properly characterized by any of the intentional or sub-intentional descriptions just noted.

Such a view is not without difficulties, however, for there are alternatives to this truth-based account with some plausibility. To the extent that an organism has explicitly intentional motivation for cognitive activity, it may be more plausible to characterize those motivations in terms of a desire for knowledge or understanding rather than in terms of a desire to get to the truth, for we typically view mere true belief as something less than what we really want. Moreover, this point about fully intentional cognitive activity carries over to subintentional contexts as well. If the function of cognition is to be given a factive characterization – one which implies truth, as opposed to one which requires only adequate coping with an environment for purposes of survival and reproduction – the factives of knowledge and understanding have at least as much going for them as truth itself. That is, it may be more plausible to hold that the function of cognition is to produce knowledge or understanding of one's surroundings than it is to maintain that the function of cognition is to get to the truth about one's surroundings.

I do not wish to rest my negative answer to the question of whether truth is the primary epistemic goal on a rejection of truth-based accounts of cognition, however. My own view is that something close to a truth-based account is correct. Since my answer to the question before us does not depend on my view of this matter, I will present only the briefest account of it here. In my view, the fundamental function of cognition and the fundamental intentional attitudes involved in cognitive activity can be characterized without appeal to the concept of truth. The function in question is that of determining, for any claim *p*, whether *p*, e.g. whether it is raining, or whether a particular object is a predator. Such a characterization appeals to no factive concepts stronger than truth, however. Moreover, even though the affective states underlying cognitive activity often involve factives such as knowledge or understanding, such states are not universal – not everyone wants knowledge, for example, and not everyone is motivated by a concern for understanding. What is fundamental to explicitly intentional cognitive activity as such is a weaker state, for even small children and animals engage in fully intentional cognitive activity. We characterize curiosity as the desire to know, but small children lacking the concept of knowledge display curiosity nonetheless. The conclusion to draw from these considerations is that an adequate characterization of cognition as such will appeal to no motivational structure, either intentional or non-intentional, involving a factive element stronger than truth. To the extent, then, that we are persuaded that such a motivational structure must involve facticity of some sort, we should have no objection to characterizing cognition in terms of the goal of truth.³

Let us return to the main issue, arising from the fact that the argument we are considering requires that for any epistemic value *V* other than truth itself, the fundamental goal in terms of which a theory of *V* is constructed is truth itself.

Even if we grant that truth is in some way fundamental to our understanding of cognition itself, much more is needed to sustain this generalization. In particular, one would have to be able to argue that truth is fundamental to any of the kinds of purely theoretical cognitive successes noted earlier. Some such successes clearly involve the concept of truth, concepts such as knowledge, understanding, wisdom, likely hypotheses, and justified beliefs; and if these concepts involve the concept of truth, there is some hope that the goal of truth is somehow fundamental to an adequate account of

these concepts. There are also cognitive successes that are not obviously truth-related, such as the concepts of making sense of the course of experience and having found an empirically adequate theory. Both of these concepts can be explained without recourse to the goal of truth. An empirically adequate theory is one that will never be refuted by the course of experience, and one makes sense of the course of experience by developing a classification system for experiences together with a theory of explanation of how the various categories are explanatorily related.

Another example of a cognitive success that is not obviously truth-related is that of responsible inquiry. Explaining why will take a bit of work, and we can begin by distinguishing deontic concepts from evaluative ones. Most ethical theories are teleological, explaining deontic notions such as obligation, permission, and forbiddenness in terms of evaluative notions such as the good. Not all do, however. Deontological theories refuse such definitions, explaining deontic concepts in other ways, the paradigm example being a Kantian theory that explains forbiddenness in terms of internal contradictions between universal maxims.

Epistemology has seen defenders of what is termed deontology, and here Chisholm is the paradigm example. Epistemic deontologists have not been deontologists in the sense defined in the previous paragraph, however, for they have defined epistemic duties in terms of epistemic values such as truth. Chisholm, for example, says our epistemic duties arise from the fundamental duty to (do one's best to) believe the truth and avoid error (Chisholm, 1977).

What would real deontology look like in epistemology? A good example of such can be developed along Bayesian lines. According to one kind of Bayesianism,⁴ each of us has a complete theory of evidence in our heads, encoded in the form of conditional probabilities. Such a theory can explain the forbiddenness of a (degree of) belief in terms of logical notions such as logical inconsistency, rather than in terms of value terms. A degree of belief is forbidden when, in the face of new experience, it becomes logically inconsistent with the relevant conditional probabilities.

Other examples are available as well. Though Richard Foley⁵ wholeheartedly endorses the standard epistemic goal of getting to the truth (now) and avoiding error (now), his theory doesn't require this teleological aspect. On his theory, a belief is justified if and only if it conforms to one's deepest epistemic standards. These standards are epistemic principles one would endorse given as much time to reflect as is needed to reach a stable point of view.⁶ Once we have such internal standards playing a theoretical role, real deontology can emerge, for it is in conforming to these standards that one's epistemic duties are satisfied.

Teleology in epistemology is needed only when the epistemic principles are licensed in some other, non-subjective way. If one's theory is truly subjective, then consistency with an internalized theory of evidence is all that is needed for defining key epistemic concepts such as justification. If, however, the theory of evidence is objective, then one needs some standard against which to assess its adequacy. It is here that epistemic teleology has its natural home.

Given this background, let us return again to the concept of responsible inquiry. The concept of epistemic responsibility can have strong subjective overtones, though it need not. A theory of epistemic responsibility may be modeled on the ethical notion of responsibility, which is to be contrasted with the notions of praiseworthiness and

blameworthiness. In the moral sphere, one can be blameless in failing to live up to one's responsibility, and if we analogize to epistemic responsibility, we will be willing to say that one's inquiry might be irresponsible but blameless. If we refuse to distinguish epistemic responsibility from epistemic blamelessness, our theory of epistemic responsibility will be much more subjective, and the possibility of a non-teleological account of it will emerge.

Not much turns on this issue in the present context, however, for even in the face of a compelling argument that responsibility should be identified with blamelessness, there will still be an epistemic concept of value that can be understood in non-teleological terms – namely, intellectually blameless inquiry. So not only are there the notions of sense-making and empirical adequacy that do not presume the goal of truth, there are other, normative notions that can equally be clarified without appeal to the goal of truth.

Conclusion

The slogan that truth is the epistemic goal has influenced much of epistemology in recent history, and we have seen that there is some truth in this idea. In particular, the idea of truth as a goal will play a significant and fundamental role in our understanding of cognition itself. The claim that truth is the primary epistemic goal, however, goes well beyond such a claim. It implies that the concept of truth plays a fundamental role in any adequate theory of any cognitive success of a purely theoretical sort. The view I have defended is that such a position has too narrow a view of the variety of epistemic values and goods, and that once we appreciate this variety and the broadened conception of the domain of epistemological inquiry, we will go no further than to embrace the idea that truth is an important and central epistemic value and goal.

Notes

- 1 For discussion of these complications, see Klein (1981).
- 2 To my mind, the most serious such problem is that reliabilism cannot explain adequately the concept of propositional justification, the kind of justification one might have for a proposition one does not believe or which one disbelieves (believes the opposite). I have argued this point in several places (e.g. Kvanvig, 1990, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2003).
- 3 For a more complete investigation of these issues, see the chapter on the value of truth in my 2003.
- 4 For an intuitive account of Bayesianism and its commitments, see van Fraassen (1990).
- 5 The view I discuss here is from Foley (1986).
- 6 This "operational" definition of the concept of one's deep standards leads to various objections to Foley's view, of the sort that usually plague counterfactual accounts. For example, if one's deepest standards are chary of reflection of any kind, what results from Foley-reflection will be self-stultifying. To avoid these problems, one could develop a Foley-like view where the counterfactuals in question were taken to be evidentially related to the question of what one's deep standards are, but deny that they are related definitionally.

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Truth as the Primary Epistemic Goal: A Working Hypothesis

Marian David

I Possessing Truth

Let us first consider what it means to talk of truth as a goal, without worrying about its being the primary epistemic goal. “I want truth” is a bit like “I want fruit.” Like fruit, truth comes in pieces. We have separate words for the different sorts of pieces fruit comes in. The pieces truth comes in we can just call *truths*. Philosophers often call them true *propositions*. The term is convenient because it also fits the pieces falsehood comes in. Say you are looking at the monitor and assert that the flight is leaving. I am looking too and I also assert that the flight is leaving. We both assert the same thing, the same proposition: the proposition that the flight is leaving. The proposition is either true or false. If it is true, we are both right; if it is false, we are both wrong. So, “I want truth” says that I want true propositions. “I want *the* truth,” taken