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**Is Truth the Primary Epistemic Goal?**

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# Is Truth the Primary Epistemic Goal?



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For Diotima and Janis Samuel



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# 1. Introduction

"Is truth the primary epistemic goal?" This dissertation examines the three kinds of answers that have been offered to this question, and their systematic import.<sup>1</sup> First, there are those who affirm it is; second, there are those who deny it is; and thirdly, there are those who argue that truth is simply not an epistemic goal at all.<sup>2</sup> The third reply shouldn't be confused with denying that the truth is a primary epistemic goal, since the second argument is not an argument to chase truth from the epistemic domain, but is simply about finding a less fundamental place for truth in the value-structure that organizes epistemic goals.

Going further into this dialectic, the naysayers can be subdivided into two groupings. In the first group are those who deny the claim that there is a single fundamental epistemic goal at all. For them, there is always a plurality of epistemic goals present. Kvanvig gives the following list of epistemic goals: "epistemic goals include knowledge, understanding, wisdom, rationality, justification, sense-making and empirically adequate theories in addition to getting the truth and avoiding error."<sup>3</sup> On the other side there are those who assume that there is a single fundamental

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1 At this point I thank my supervisor Wolfgang Spohn for formulating the working theme of my dissertation as an open question. Different working titles, like "Truth in epistemology" or "The centrality of truth in epistemology", would have been possible. As I see it, the benefit of thinking about an open question is that you start every day anew to think about the question and its implications.

2 That is because the term "goal" might be seen as reserved exclusively for practical action. In Chapter 2 I evaluate several arguments that raise doubt about truth being an epistemic goal.

3 By giving this list, Kvanvig does not present an argument against epistemic value monism. He needs to defend the further assumption that all goals on the lists are equally good. Moreover, within this inquiry we shall recheck the alternative epistemic goals on Kvanvig's list in order to see whether all goals on the list are actually independent from the truth goal. If not, the dependent goals are merely means for attaining the truth goal. At least we can assume that knowledge and truth are both epistemic goals, because the knowledge goal cannot be reduced to the truth goal (see Kvanvig 2005, p. 287).

epistemic goal, which is not truth but an alternative epistemic goal. We will call this second subgroup "alternative monism". So alternative monism is also in opposition to epistemic value pluralism concerning the order of epistemic goals and epistemic values.

Instead of continuing with the labels of "yea-sayers" and "naysayers" it is time to give the accurate labels for the groups introduced. The former are clearly committed to a monism, because for them truth is the primary epistemic goal,<sup>4</sup> so I will call them "epistemic value monists".<sup>5</sup> The naysayers are pluralists, because they state that we have more than one fundamental epistemic value; thus, I call them "epistemic value pluralists". The distinction between monism and pluralism should not be applied to the concept of truth itself.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. A NORMATIVE QUESTION

It is important to emphasize that the scope of my work is not empirical. I do not intend to answer the question I have raised by referring to matters of fact. Therefore the *prima facie* objection that many people are not factually interested in the pursuit of truth is ruled out. Looking for a factive answer is interesting and enlightening, but I think that we will obtain more philosophical insights from understanding our question as a normative question. Marian David nicely expresses the idea that the truth goal as an ought-to-do aim. He writes:

The idea that something is the primary epistemic goal has more the force of an "ought" than the force of an "is." It says that, to the extent that we do have epistemic goals, we ought to have them because we have the one singled out as primary. Obviously, it is rather risky to make claims about what we actually

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4 When I use the term "monism" in an unqualified way I refer to epistemic value monism and not to alternative monism.

5 Goldman (1999) has introduced the term "veritism" for the yea-sayers.

6 One might ask whether truth consists of one thing or many things, especially in relation to the functions that truth plays in many different discourses (e.g. in science, in moral theory, even in art and literature).

want and about why we want what we want, without asking or studying many of "us." Even if all of us do have the epistemic goals discussed earlier (or at least closely related ones), and even if these goals are in fact connected in the manner mentioned above, some of us might not realize that their epistemic goals are so connected. It would then be wrong to say that we have other goals because we have the goal that is in fact the primary one; all that can be said is that we ought to. (David, 2005, p. 302–303; emphasis in original)

David clearly expresses the case for saying that aiming at the truth contains a normative claim. Furthermore he argues that it is easier to determine an answer to the normative question than to the empirical question. The latter couldn't be completely answered unless we polled everybody, an obviously impossible task. Additionally, even if we could provide samples that helped us to create a descriptive picture, it wouldn't get us any closer to answering the question of whether the truth as an epistemic goal is a justified normative requirement, because we evaluate the normative claims with respect to whether they are reasonable or not, and not whether they are empirically testable. A normative claim is not refuted once we have detected that many persons factually ignore it. Quite the contrary: We might say that the requirement is even in need of enforcement, once we realize how many people do not follow it.

Second, epistemic evaluation itself sets normative standards. Evaluative concepts can be characterized by their double role of being normative and descriptive at the same time.<sup>7</sup> Note that our observations of ignorance, for instance, are already led by our normative intuitions. We cannot describe ignorance without taking into account the criteria of justified belief. If we describe how a believer is actually ignorant we have already prescribed how the believer should actually perform his belief act, because the concept of ignorance is already a normative concept which provides us with normative standards of evaluation.

It is clear that we have learned a great deal about the human beings from the study of their mechanisms of acquiring and managing information. This empirical research has and will continue to have a great

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<sup>7</sup> Spohn (2002) has introduced this term and has discussed it using the example of a theory of rationality.

impact on epistemology. I want to emphasize, however, that epistemology is a normative discipline and therefore epistemologists are allowed to reconsider normative question. Epistemology is normative because central epistemic concepts, like epistemic justification or rational belief, are normative. We are dealing with formal evaluative concepts, here, and not context-specific epistemologies, such as one might examine in the history of the sciences, for instance.

## 2. TRUTH AS THE PRIMARY EPISTEMIC GOAL

Let us proceed to the statement of the problem that has aroused the most controversy, which is whether the truth can or cannot be the fundamental epistemic goal. To repeat: it is in generally accepted that truth is *an* epistemic goal. However, the question remains whether it is the fundamental one. Whether it is or not depends, partly, on how we construe fundamental. So let us begin our approach to the problem here.

There are several ways in which we speak of something as fundamental. We could mean that it requires no proof. We could mean that we build our arguments upon it. However, the meaning that holds the greatest interest for us defines "fundamental" in terms of what takes precedent in the order of derivation. Consider two items, *A* and *B*: if *A* is fundamental to *B*, then it is possible to derive *B* from *A* but *not* vice versa. Furthermore, if *A* and *B* are related and *A* is allegedly fundamental to *B*, then we can say with respect to value attribution that *B* has only instrumental value. This presents us with a clear hierarchy of values: *B*'s *value* depends on its relation to *A*.

How does truth as a goal fit into this discussion? Assume that truth is represented by *A*, and coherence by *B*. Coherence will then be a derivative value, in as much as it gains its salience only with relation to the search for truth. The truth goal, on the other hand, is fundamental. You could not derive the truth goal from coherence.<sup>8</sup> Relatedly, the value of coherence is

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<sup>8</sup>I do not want to maintain that coherence is an epistemic goal, because in a very

instrumental because coherence is valued for being conducive to truth. Strictly speaking, the instrumental value is defined as a means of attainment. Any means helpful for attaining the central goal becomes derivatively valuable in so far as the central goal is valuable. We can further conclude the following: if the truth goal had no value, then the means to obtain the truth would not have value either.

To epistemic value pluralists, the claim that truth is the fundamental value seems unjustified on the level of our above definitions. That is to say, it isn't the case that any other epistemic value has only derivative value. Their central intuition is that we can be in a situation where we do not attain truth but something else that is also epistemically valuable. In contrast, epistemic value monists are committed to the view that one can only attain something of epistemic value by attaining truth. This is the central debate of my dissertation in a nutshell.

So far, we have clarified what type of question we are confronted with. We have seen what the primacy claim of epistemic value monism lies in. To complete our gloss on the terms of the controversy, we need to confront another question: Does our debate presuppose a certain concept of truth? It seems intuitively reasonable to expect that the choice between the many concepts or theories of truth would affect the discussion. Yet our argument is that no commitment to a particular theory of truth is involved in accepting the primacy of the truth goal.<sup>9</sup> The reason is: Epistemology in

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strict sense coherence is only a means to attain truth. In the literature coherence is sometimes treated as though it were an epistemic goal itself, but I'd advocate restraint here. Coherence, while it might be epistemically valuable, is not an epistemic goal. Firstly, this would unnecessarily inflate the list of epistemic goals. Secondly, we would confuse the difference between a means and a goal. A means is not per se a goal. For instance, my belt is helpful to keep my trousers up. In a situation where I have lost my belt somewhere in the house, finding the belt can be the goal of my inquiry. But my search for the belt is only a means to my real goal, of getting dressed, in the same way the buttons on my shirt and my shoelaces are. I think this example is helpful for understanding what epistemologists actually do when they reflect on what coherence is and in what sense coherence is truth-conducive.

<sup>9</sup> There are several works at the intersection between epistemology and truth theories. See for instance Sosa (1993, 2001b) and Williams (1986). But none of these works

general is not determined by any rigid conception of truth, except for the everyday usage of the concept of "facts".<sup>10</sup>

Another issue which quite obviously must be discussed is the matter of doxastic control. Normally we associate goals, especially personal goals, with deliberation and personal planning. How does the term "goal" fit in the epistemic value domain? The best way to reflect on this issue is to take up the question of the role the will plays in our belief formation, since this is what is assumed in deliberation or personal planning. Furthermore, in a more theoretical vein, it seems important to decide whether epistemic goals in general, or the truth goal in particular, imply a commitment to doxastic voluntarism. Doxastic voluntarism assumes that our will has control over our beliefs. Another assumption of doxastic voluntarism is that the formation of beliefs is similar to or even falls under the category of action.<sup>11</sup> The raising of my arm is controlled by my will, and the raising of my arm is an action. Doxastic voluntarists claim that the formation of a belief works similarly to the raising of an arm.

As I take it, there is no commitment to doxastic voluntarism. It is not implied by the acceptance of truth as an epistemic goal; the truth goal provides at best an *indirect* control of our belief system. Epistemic goals and especially the truth goal provide an indirect goal because I can discard false beliefs. At this point one might object that already indirect control is a form of control and therefore the acceptance of the truth goal presupposes doxastic voluntarism. I do not want to go into greater detail; however, I think that voluntarism is primarily interested in direct control.

So far I have been attempting to clear the field, explaining all the implications of our question and, as importantly, what it doesn't imply:

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come to the conclusion that a particular theory of truth has to be accepted by epistemologists. Pritchard (2004) has given a nice work in comparing deflationism in epistemology with the deflationism of truth.

<sup>10</sup> Epistemology in general is not affected by the problems and paradoxes that theorists of truth investigate, because the latter do not attempt to complete the analysis of truth. See Lehrer (2000, pp. 26–32) for further discussion. Goldman (1999, Ch. 2) argues for a mixed account between a correspondence theory of truth and a deflationary theory of truth.

<sup>11</sup> See Bennett (1990), who thinks that believing is voluntary.



either a position on the theory of the truth, or a position in the psychology of belief. In the following section I explain how I situate my project within epistemology.

### 3. VALUE-DRIVEN EPISTEMOLOGY

I situate my project within value-driven epistemology. Value-driven epistemology is focused on which epistemic goals (and values) are central for epistemology. Traditional epistemology proceeds by presupposing certain epistemic values and epistemic goals, and then going forward to make claims about true beliefs, proof, etc., without checking to see whether its presuppositions are justified.

Value-driven epistemology has a narrow and a broad scope. The narrow scope of the project is concerned with a particular problem, which is called the *Meno Problem* in the literature after Plato's dialogue. There, the intriguing question is posed about what makes value lies in knowledge in comparison to mere true belief.

In the *Meno*, Socrates seems to show that, according to the criteria of practical success, knowledge and mere true belief are equally successful. The possibility that knowledge has more value in terms of practical success is excluded from the start.<sup>12</sup> The value question refers to the distinctively epistemic value of knowledge. Hereafter, I will call the *Meno* problem the "value problem of knowledge". At this point we do not need to go into more details of a discussion that has accrued an impressive amount of literature. However, epistemic value pluralists take it that the upshot of the value problem is that epistemic value monists do not have the resources to explain why knowledge should possess this distinct epistemic value.

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12 This assumption is taken for granted here, even though in the epistemological literature some authors defend the idea that the additional value of knowledge has its roots in knowledge's guaranteeing more practical success than mere true belief, because knowledge has more stability than mere true belief. Olsson (2007), for instance, argues that we can identify the additional value of knowledge in terms of practical success.