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## INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES AND THE EPISTEMIC VALUE OF TRUTH

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

*University of California, Irvine & University of Edinburgh*

**ABSTRACT.** The idea that truth is the fundamental epistemic good is explained and defended. It is argued that this proposal has been prematurely rejected on grounds that are both independently problematic and which also turn on an implausible way of understanding the proposal. A more compelling account of what it means for truth to be the fundamental epistemic good is then developed, one that treats the intellectual virtues, and thereby virtuous inquiry, as the primary theoretical notion.

### 0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

It wasn't all that long ago that the idea that truth is the fundamental epistemic good was orthodoxy in epistemology.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this was the kind of claim that was so commonplace that it was almost not worth stating, as to do so would be somewhat superfluous. Isn't the epistemic realm *defined* by its relationship to the truth, such that this is what sets it apart from evaluative realms that have other fundamental goods, like the practical or the moral? Such orthodoxy is no more, however. Now it is more common to find epistemologists defending higher epistemic standings as being the fundamental epistemic good, sometimes in such a way that there are multiple fundamental epistemic goods.<sup>2</sup>

I think this move away from treating truth as the fundamental epistemic good is premature, in that it is based on an impoverished conception of what this thesis amounts to. I canvass support for what I claim is a more plausible account of what treating truth as the fundamental epistemic good might involve. In particular, I argue that the right way to unpack this thesis is by appeal to the

intellectual virtues and, thereby, to intellectually virtuous inquiry. But before I articulate the positive proposal, I first need to describe some of the reasons why epistemologists have turned away from the idea of truth as being the fundamental epistemic good, and to foreshadow why I think these reasons are problematic.

### 1. THREE CORE CRITIQUES OF TRUTH AS THE FUNDAMENTAL EPISTEMIC GOOD

We should begin by clarifying what is meant by the claim that truth is the fundamental epistemic good. To say that something is a fundamental epistemic good is to say that, from a purely epistemic point of view, it is finally (i.e., non-instrumentally) valuable. Accordingly, to say that truth is *the* fundamental epistemic good is to say that it is the *only* thing that is finally valuable from a purely epistemic point of view.<sup>3</sup> It follows that everything else of epistemic value has to be understood as being, from a purely epistemic point of view, only of instrumental value relative to the truth (i.e., it only has instrumental epistemic value, rather than final epistemic value). So, for example, we epistemically value justified beliefs because justification is instrumentally epistemically valuable as a means to truth (and not because we think epistemic justification is finally epistemically valuable). Call this view *epistemic-value T-monism*, or ‘EVTM’ for short, in order to convey the fact that this is a thesis specifically about *epistemic* value, where there is just *one* fundamental epistemic good (that’s the ‘monism’ part), and it is *truth* (that’s the ‘T’ part).<sup>4</sup>

Why might contemporary commentators be inclined to reject EVTm? Let’s start with what is probably the most common complaint, which is that such a view seems committed to valuing even the most trivial truths and, what is worse, valuing them on a par with weighty, significant truths. To take a familiar example in the literature, consider the number of grains of sand on the beach.<sup>5</sup> While there is a truth at issue here, no-one in their right mind would trouble themselves to pursue it, given the monumental practical hurdles involved in determining it. In fact, the practical hurdles regarding determining this truth are a bit of red herring in this context. Epistemic value is just one axis of evaluation, after all, so it’s consistent with this truth being of final epistemic value that such value is outweighed by other factors, such as the practical disvalue of discovering it. Interestingly, however, even if this truth were presented to you on a plate I don’t think any sensible person would be interested in acquiring it. That is, it seems that it simply isn’t of value at all, even once the practical

disvalue is removed. And if it's of no value, then *a fortiori* it is of no epistemic value, and certainly not of final epistemic value. How can that be squared with EVTm?

The heroic defender of EVTm might at this point claim that there is an epistemic value in believing such a truth, it's just that it is so negligible that it seems like no value at all.<sup>6</sup> But even if we can make this line credible, there is another difficulty lurking in the vicinity here. For any trivial truth of this kind we can always imagine a corresponding truth that all will agree is of tremendous value, even if we restrict our attention to purely epistemic concerns (and hence bracket practical, moral and other non-epistemic concerns), such as a fundamental statement of scientific law. Suppose one is now faced with the choice between these two truths. If truth is the fundamental epistemic good, then why should one care which one of them one ends up with? After all, they are both true. Accordingly, if one is doomed to only being given the one truth, then why should it matter which of them one ends up with? And yet obviously one does care which truth one ends up with. Indeed, one does so, seemingly, for specifically epistemic reasons. That is, even from a purely epistemic point of view (i.e., setting aside the practical utility of being aware of the deep scientific truth), it seems that one should value the significant truth over the trivial one. But if that's right, then it seems that there must be more to epistemic value than just the truth. Call this the *trivial truths problem*.<sup>7</sup>

What is puzzling about the dialectical set-up of the trivial truths problem is that even though it is used to critique EVTm it seems to nonetheless implicitly appeal to it, or at least something very like it anyway. After all, isn't the reason that one would value the significant truth far more than the trivial truth in this example precisely *because one cares about the truth*? If that's right, then rather than making us doubt EVTm, it should instead prompt us to think again about whether we are unpacking this thesis correctly. We will return to this point.

Besides, if the trivial truths problem poses a genuine difficulty for EVTm, then it can easily be extended to other accounts of epistemic value. For example, suppose one holds that it is knowledge that is the fundamental epistemic good rather than truth, and hence one defends what we might call *epistemic value K-monism* (or 'EVKM' for short).<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, one will face the very same issue. For on this view why should one care whether one knows the weighty truth rather than the insignificant one, given that they are both instances of knowledge? Instead, one should, it seems, be indifferent between these two pieces of knowledge, at least from a purely epistemic point of view. It follows that the trivial truths problem is not unique to EVTm anyway.

A second putative difficulty for EVTm is the so-called *swamping problem*. This was initially presented as a challenge to reliabilist conceptions of justification, but it quickly became clear that the

real target here is not so much reliabilism as the conception of epistemic value that reliabilism is standardly thought to be allied with, which is EVTM.<sup>9</sup> The structure of the problem is as follows. If EVTM is correct, then we only value a belief's epistemic properties, such as being justified or reliably formed, because they have instrumental epistemic value relative to the fundamental epistemic goodness of truth. Generally speaking, however, if something is valuable only instrumentally as a means to something else, and that other thing is already present, then no additional value is generated. That is, the instrumental value gets 'swamped' by the presence of the non-instrumentally valuable good. If that's right, however, then this seems to generate the awkward consequence for EVTM that true belief that enjoys a positive epistemic standing (like knowledge) cannot be of greater epistemic value than a corresponding mere true belief.

In order to see this difficulty in more detail, consider a familiar example, due to Linda Zagzebski (2003).<sup>10</sup> From the coffee-making axiological perspective, we value reliable coffee-making machines because they are reliable ways of getting good coffee. But since we only value them as a means to good coffee, it follows that no additional value is conferred on a good cup of coffee by the fact that it was produced by a reliable coffee-making machine. We can see this point in action by imagining two excellent cups of coffee that are identical in every relevant respect, such as in terms of taste, odour, quantity, appearance, and so on. Suppose that one of them was produced by a reliable coffee-making machine, with the other produced by an unreliable coffee-making machine that just happened to produce good coffee that day. Knowing that they are identical in every respect, would it matter to us which of the two cups we were given (e.g., would we be willing to pay more for the coffee produced by the reliable coffee-making machine)? Clearly not. The point is that the instrumental value of being produced by a reliable coffee-making machine gets 'swamped' once the relevant non-instrumental value (great coffee) is in play.

It seems to follow that, according to EVTM, the instrumental epistemic value of any epistemic standing that a belief enjoys will always be swamped by the non-instrumental epistemic value conferred by that belief being true. Accordingly, a true belief that enjoys a positive epistemic standing can be no more valuable, from a purely epistemic point of view, than a corresponding true belief that enjoys no positive epistemic standing whatsoever. In particular, knowledge is no more epistemically valuable than a corresponding instance of mere true belief.

In response to the swamping problem, some commentators have concluded that truth cannot be the fundamental epistemic good, and have opted instead for either a pluralistic conception of epistemic value (whereby there are multiple fundamental epistemic goods), or else adopted a different

kind of epistemic value monism (e.g., one where it is knowledge, rather than truth, that is the fundamental epistemic good, such as the EVKM thesis described above).<sup>11</sup> But this is premature. In particular, there are at least two, inter-related, lines of defence that proponents of EVTm can mount here. Both purport to show that the advertised consequence of EVTm is not nearly as counterintuitive as first presented.

To begin with, notice that it is open to the defender of EVTm to point out that the problematic conclusion only follows if one focusses exclusively on the target belief in question (i.e., knowledge that *p* *versus* true belief that *p*). That way of setting up the contrast makes it seem that all that matters from an epistemic point of view is the truth of *p*. But why should the proponent of EVTm accept that? In particular, she can argue that while there might be no difference in epistemic value when it comes to the contrast between knowledge and true belief *that p*, there is nonetheless a difference of epistemic value here. For the subject who knows that *p* will tend to have lots of other true beliefs in the vicinity (not least regarding the epistemic basis of that knowledge), in contrast to the subject who merely truly believes that *p* (i.e., who lacks any epistemic basis for that belief).

This point goes hand-in-hand with another defensive line that the proponent of EVTm can pursue, which is to remind the reader that her thesis is specifically about *epistemic* value, and not about value *simpliciter*. That is, conceding that knowledge that *p* is not epistemically more valuable than mere true belief that *p* is quite compatible with nonetheless arguing that knowledge that *p* is more valuable than mere true belief that *p*. In particular, as in fact many commentators have pointed out, knowledge seems to have a value that mere true belief lacks that isn't specifically epistemic at all, such as being practically or even ethically valuable.<sup>12</sup> If that's right, then we can account for our strong intuition that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief without having to concede that, at least with our focus restricted to a specific proposition, it isn't *epistemically* more valuable.

Putting these two points together, it follows that, *contra* the pessimistic response to the swamping problem, EVTm can account both for the general greater epistemic value of knowledge over mere true belief (i.e., so long as we don't artificially restrict our focus only to the target proposition), and can also account for the general greater value of knowledge over mere true belief.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as we will see below, there is even more that proponents of EVTm can say on this score once we examine more closely what the view amounts to.

A final putative problem for EVTm concerns the goal of inquiry. It is natural to suppose that the intellectual goal of well-conducted inquiry will be whatever the fundamental epistemic good is. If it's right, then EVTm entails that truth is the intellectual goal of inquiry. But some have challenged

this claim on the grounds that what legitimately closes a well-conducted inquiry is often not truth at all, but rather a particular epistemic grip on the truth, such as knowing it or understanding it.<sup>14</sup> Doesn't that suggest that the intellectual goal of inquiry is not truth at all, but rather these other epistemic standings? Given the correlation between the intellectual goal of inquiry and the fundamental epistemic good just noted, however, that seems to suggest that truth is not the fundamental epistemic good after all, *contra* EVTM. Call this the *goal of inquiry problem*.

I find the claim that well-conducted inquiry is often only legitimately closed by a belief that enjoys a distinctive kind of epistemic standing, such as knowledge or understanding, very plausible. But I don't think that this conclusion suffices to create problems for EVTM. In fact, I think that the *opposite* is the case, in that proponents of EVTM should embrace the fact that only true belief that enjoys a certain kind of epistemic standing suffices to legitimately close inquiry. The point is that in caring about the truth, one wants not only to believe it, but also to know it and to understand it. That's just what manifesting a concern for the truth amount to. In particular, we are not to understand this as really an implicit concern for something else over and above the truth, but rather as a manifestation of precisely what EVTM prescribes for inquiry.

An analogy might help here. Consider a chef who is devoted to making delicious food. Her activity in making the food is not complete once the delicious food has been made, however, since clearly she will want to taste the food for herself to determine that it is indeed delicious. But does this entail that what the chef is *really* concerned with is not making delicious food, but rather the tasting of it? No, of course not! The tasting of the food is merely a way of ascertaining that the goal of producing delicious food has been met. In the same way, the proponent of EVTM can argue that the fact that it is often knowledge or understanding that legitimately closes inquiry does not show that truth is not the intellectual goal of inquiry, but only that as inquirers who seek the truth we also want to establish to our satisfaction that the truth is in our grasp.

As we will see, although the defender of EVTM can offer this kind of line against the goal of inquiry problem, there are in fact deeper issues in play here. Indeed, understanding these deeper issues will also help us deal more effectively with the other two problems as well. In order to get to that point, however, we first need to reflect on the importance of the intellectual virtues to these debates about epistemic axiology.

## 2. EVTM AND THE INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

Let's go back to the trivial truths problem. Recall that this turned on the idea that if one treats truth as a fundamental epistemic value, in line with EVTM, then one is required to treat all truths as being of equal epistemic value, even the manifestly trivial ones. We noted above that there is something very fishy about this reasoning since the intuition that we would prefer the weighty truths over the insignificant ones was itself motivated by noting that any sensible truth-seeker would prefer the former. And yet isn't the truth-seeker the person who treats truth as a fundamental epistemic value? Indeed, as we noted at the end of the last section, it seems that the intellectual goal of inquiry just is the fundamental epistemic good, so if one's inquiry is aimed at truth then surely this is because one regards it as the fundamental epistemic good. But if someone who values truth as a fundamental epistemic good would prefer weighty truths over insignificant ones, then there must be something amiss in the very idea that EVTM entails that one should epistemically value all truths equally.

If EVTM does not entail that one should epistemically value all truths equally, then this prompts two questions. The first is why we thought that it had this problematic entailment, and the second is what it does entail. We can get a handle on the second question by working out an answer to the first. What underlies the problematic way of unpacking the EVTM thesis is the very natural thought that the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation is a proposition. With this thought in play, it follows that if we have two propositions that are both true, regardless of whether they are weighty or insignificant, then we have two items that are of equal value from a purely epistemic point of view, at least if EVTM is right. But a moment's reflection reveals that such an account of the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation cannot possibly be correct. Indeed, the very fact that we can talk of propositions that are weighty as opposed to insignificant from a purely epistemic point of view should make us realise that there is something seriously amiss with this way of thinking. As we might put it, the weighty propositions seem to contain more truth, whatever that is supposed to mean, than their insignificant counterparts.

Moreover, notice that there is no straightforward way of tweaking the idea that the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation is a proposition in order to get the desired result. It is not as if, for example, there will be anything about the propositional structure of weighty truths that will set them apart from insignificant truths, such as that the weighty truths end up being conjunctions of claims in disguise, for example, unlike their insignificant counterparts. Indeed, the opposite might well be the



case, in that one can imagine structurally complex propositions that are insignificant (a long conjunction of pointless claims, say), as opposed to weighty propositions that are structurally simple.

The problem, of course, is that understanding where we went awry is only part of the challenge. The hard part is now getting a grip on how EVTm should be understood, once we jettison the idea that the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation is the proposition. After all, the idea that we measure one's success at achieving the truth goal in terms of counting beliefs in true propositions at least has the merit of simplicity. I want to suggest what I think is a fruitful way of approaching this question.

In the last 20-30 years, epistemology has gone through what has been described as a 'virtue-turn', whereby questions to do with intellectual virtue, and thus with intellectual character, have become primary. This has influenced all aspects of epistemology, and in the process led to novel proposals with regard to such perennial topics as the nature of knowledge, as well as stimulating new lines of inquiry, such as concerning understanding and its relationship to other epistemic standings.<sup>15</sup> But although the virtue-turn in epistemology has had an influence on the debate about epistemic value, it seems to me that the import it has for this debate has been misunderstood. That is, rather than leading to a reconfiguration of how we understand the idea of truth being the fundamental epistemic good, in line with EVTm, it has instead been used to motivate alternatives to EVTm, usually of a pluralistic kind.<sup>16</sup> And yet, as we will see, if one follows through on the virtue turn as regards one's understanding of truth as the fundamental epistemic good, then there is then no motivation to abandon EVTm in the first place.

What I have in mind in this regard is to take the notion of an intellectual virtue as primary, and then understand claims about epistemic value in terms of this notion. After all, it is generally accepted that we have a good grip on what an intellectual virtue is, and yet we have discovered that unpacking claims about epistemic value is incredibly tricky, at least once we abandon the problematic (albeit simple) view whereby the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation is the proposition. Accordingly, rather than trying to work out how we should think about epistemic value entirely in the abstract, as it were, we should focus instead on something in the vicinity that we already have a fair understanding of, which is intellectual virtue, and use that as the foundation for our account of epistemic value.

Intellectual virtues are generally understood as having a number of distinctive features.<sup>17</sup> They are skill-like traits, and in that sense are akin to cognitive skills more broadly, in that they are reliable cognitive capacities of the subject. But they are not merely cognitive skills. For one thing, they are acquired and maintained in particular ways. While a cognitive skill can be innate, or else acquired in a

completely unreflective way, an intellectual virtue is acquired through conscious emulation of a virtuous individual. This involves a reflective process of habituation as the emulation eventually becomes second nature. Even then, however, one needs to cultivate one's intellectual virtues in order to ensure they are not lost, and so constant reflection on one's performance is always required to some degree (i.e., intellectual virtues are not like ordinary skills like riding a bike, in that once they are mastered one tends to retain them thereafter regardless).

Intellectual virtues are also different from mere cognitive skills in terms of their axiology. Cognitive skills may well be practically useful, and so are intellectual virtues, but the latter also has a distinctive value in terms of being essential components of a life of human flourishing, the good life. As such they inherit the final value of the good life itself. This has certain consequences for how they are treated by virtuous subjects. A virtuous person might elect to let one of her (mere) cognitive skills slide, such as if it is no longer practically useful, but she would not deliberately let her intellectual virtues slide, for that would be to lose something of final value.

The difference between the intellectual virtues and mere cognitive skills that is most relevant for our purposes, however, is that the former are characterised in part by a distinctive motivational state. In particular, the intellectual virtues are in part constituted by a desire for the truth. Clearly one can exhibit all kinds of cognitive skills, including those cognitive dispositions associated with an intellectual virtue, while lacking this kind of motivational state (e.g., as when one merely wishes to appear to be intellectual virtuous, perhaps for strategic reasons), but that would not be to manifest an intellectual virtue, as the corresponding motivational state is crucial.<sup>18</sup>

This relates to our earlier point about how the intellectual virtues are acquired and maintained in ways that are different from mere cognitive skills. In particular, whereas one's cognitive skills can be entirely passive in both their acquisition and their manifestation from a motivational point of view, the intellectual virtues are in this sense both acquired and manifested actively. In order to see this, consider the contrast between our perceptual faculties and the intellectual virtue of being observant. These faculties are innate, and so one doesn't need to do anything to acquire them or maintain them (though of course there are things that one can do to improve them). Moreover, one can gain true beliefs about one's environment using these faculties regardless of whether one cares about the truth. The intellectual virtue of being observant is very different in this regard, however, even though it employs many of the same cognitive dispositions as one's perceptual faculties. One is not born with the intellectual virtue of being observant, but rather one needs to acquire and cultivate this trait by emulating observant people around one (or as depicted in literature, such as Sherlock Holmes), where

this emulation is guided by a desire for the truth. Furthermore, one cannot passively exhibit the intellectual virtue of being observant, since it is a cognitive disposition, guided by one's motivation for the truth, that requires one to actively interrogate one's environment for information.<sup>19</sup>

The intellectual virtues thus go hand-in-hand with a certain conception of virtuous inquiry, at least in a broad sense of 'inquiry' where this means a general seeking after the truth. To manifest intellectual virtue is by its nature to be motivated towards finding out the truth. The intellectual virtues thus tend to suggest a conception of virtuous inquiry that is aimed at the truth. Hence, insofar as we regard whatever virtuous inquiry is aimed at as the fundamental epistemic good, then it follows that the intellectual virtues and EVT<sub>M</sub> are natural bedfellows. Notice, however, that while the intellectual virtues do naturally go together with EVT<sub>M</sub>, this alliance is far from obligatory. In particular, there may be ways that other accounts of epistemic value could also embrace this feature of the intellectual virtues. For example, if one held that knowledge was the fundamental epistemic good (*à la* EV<sub>KM</sub>), then one could embrace the intellectual virtues by arguing that to be motivated towards finding out the truth is to want to know it (and hence that it is knowledge that is both the aim of inquiry and the fundamental epistemic good, rather than truth).<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the fact remains that the most natural way to understand a conception of the intellectual goal of inquiry with the intellectual virtues in mind is in terms of truth, and hence EVT<sub>M</sub> is the most obvious conception of epistemic value to ally with the intellectual virtues.

What is most salient for our purposes is how reconfiguring the debate about epistemic value in terms of the intellectual virtues can offer us a way of unpacking EVT<sub>M</sub> that isn't wedded to the problematic idea that the relevant unit of epistemic evaluation is the proposition. We noted above that one peculiarity about the dialectical set-up of the trivial truths problem is that it seems that someone who cares about the truth would prefer the weighty truth over the corresponding insignificant one, which is why it is so odd that this problem is thought to primarily afflict EVT<sub>M</sub>. We now have a way of putting flesh on the bones of this thought. For the point is that a *virtuous inquiry* would prefer the weighty truth over the insignificant truth. Accordingly, if we unpack EVT<sub>M</sub> in terms of what an intellectually virtuous subject would value, and hence in terms of an intellectually virtuous inquiry, then we have a rationale for preferring the weighty truth over the insignificant truth that is entirely consistent with EVT<sub>M</sub> and its contention that truth is the fundamental epistemic good.

But this still prompts the question of why the intellectually virtuous subject would prefer the weighty truth over the insignificant truth. I think the answer to this lies in taking a love for the truth seriously. This goal is not met merely by maximising true beliefs, since such beliefs could be

inconsequential. Rather, to love the truth is to want a substantive cognitive contact with reality, which means that one's beliefs mesh up with the world in fundamental ways.<sup>21</sup> This is precisely why it is so perverse to equate the desire for truth with a motivation to maximise one's true beliefs, no matter how much cognitive contact these beliefs offer with reality, much less to treat all true beliefs as being on a par.

Indeed, this way of unpacking EVTM in terms of intellectual virtue also offers us the machinery to deal more effectively with the swamping problem. We noted above that there are considerations that the proponent of EVTM can offer in response to this problem. In particular: (i) we need to recognise that we are just focussing on a particular proposition here, and not broadening our focus to the doxastic output of the relevant belief-forming process, something that would characteristically bring with it a difference in epistemic value between knowledge and the corresponding mere true belief; and (ii) we need to remember that we are specifically talking about epistemic value (i.e., such that we can still contend that the knowledge in question can be more valuable than the corresponding mere true belief along another axis of evaluation, including *simpliciter*). We are now in a position to make an additional point in this regard.

The swamping problem trades on the idea that proponents of EVTM are committed to treating a mere true belief—i.e., one that lacks any epistemic basis at all—as having final epistemic value. But once we offer a virtue-theoretic unpacking of EVTM, then this idea starts to look very implausible. If the goal of inquiry is truth, where that means a substantive cognitive contact with reality, then this isn't something that is offered by an isolated belief that just happens to match up with the truth. Consider, for example, a gambler's belief, which luckily turns out to be true (though she doesn't know this yet), that her number will come up on the roulette wheel.<sup>22</sup> This would be a good candidate for the kind of 'mere' true belief that is at issue in the swamping problem. But it doesn't seem to offer any cognitive contact with reality at all, let alone of a substantive kind, but just a fortuitous correspondence of belief and truth. No intellectually virtuous inquirer would value this outcome, even though it involves a true belief, and this would be precisely because it fails to provide one with any kind of cognitive contact with reality. Note too that it doesn't even matter whether the truth in question is significant. If one happens, through sheer luck, to end up with a groundless true belief in a fundamental statement of scientific law, then one has not thereby gained any kind of cognitive purchase on reality. Instead, one just happens to have a belief that luckily matches with the truth, nothing more.<sup>23</sup>

This point is easily missed because we tend to run together the ‘mere’ true belief with that same belief once its truth has been established. Consider the gambler’s belief about the roulette number, but now imagine that our protagonist discovers that her belief is true, perhaps by seeing the roulette result for herself. We would still naturally refer to this belief as only luckily true, but notice that it is very different from the case as we described it. Seeing the result for oneself provides one with a cognitive grip on reality that mere guesswork doesn’t; relatedly, it provides the agent with epistemic support (indeed, in the normal case at least, the subject now has knowledge of the target proposition on this new basis). Accordingly, while such a belief does have final epistemic value, it isn’t really a ‘mere’ true belief at all, at least in the sense that’s relevant to the swamping problem (i.e., a belief that lacks any epistemic basis). The point is that once we focus our attention on the specific kind of true belief that the proponent of the swamping problem envisages, then it ceases to be plausible that the target true belief has final epistemic value, unlike epistemically grounded true beliefs, like the contrasted knowledge at issue in the swamping problem.

So once we unpack EVTM properly, in line with the intellectual virtues, then it follows that it isn’t committed to a view according to which any true belief is thereby of final epistemic value; rather, it is only those true beliefs that offer one genuine cognitive contact with reality, and that already excludes the kind of lucky true beliefs that are problematic in this regard. Accordingly, if what one cares about is the truth in the virtuous sense outlined here, then it follows that one will tend to value true beliefs that are appropriately nested within other true beliefs, and hence prefer knowledge. Indeed, one will tend to prefer true beliefs that offer an integrated grip on the nature of things, and hence provide one with understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Now one might object at this point that this way of unpacking EVTM effectively abandons the truth goal in favour of something else, such as the knowledge goal (or the understanding goal). But that would be a mistake. To begin with, recall that we noted earlier that we should not conclude from the fact that what legitimately closes inquiry is often something other than mere true belief that truth is not the goal of inquiry. If one cares about truth, then one will want to know and understand that truth, but one does so *because* one cares about the truth, and not because what one really cares about is knowledge or understanding.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, what legitimately closes inquiry is not knowledge or understanding *simpliciter* anyway, but rather knowledge and understanding that provides ones with a substantive grip on the nature of things. Just as the virtuous subject will not value trivial truths, she will not value knowledge of such trivial truths either (or understanding of them), so the move is not away from truth and

towards knowledge (or any other epistemic standing for that matter), but rather away from thinking of the truth goal as being about maximising true belief (i.e., true propositions) as opposed to securing a genuine cognitive contact with reality. The intellectual virtuous inquirer will eschew the pursuit of certain truths, including knowledge and understanding of them, where they fail to offer a substantive purchase on the nature of things. It is not knowledge or understanding (or any other epistemic standing for that matter) *simpliciter* that legitimately closes inquiry, but rather a sub-set of these states that concerns significant truths that offer such a purchase, and the virtuous inquirer seeks these epistemic states precisely because she cares about the truth.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The upshot of the foregoing is that epistemologists have been far too quick to give up on the orthodox conception of truth as the fundamental epistemic good, as encapsulated in EVTm. The problem is not this orthodoxy, but the erroneous way in which it has been unpacked. Once we unpack it differently—and in particular put the notion of intellectual virtue, and thus virtuous inquiry, centre-stage—then the advertised problems for this account of epistemic value disappear.<sup>26,27</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See David (2001, 151-2) for a long list of quotations illustrating how widely held this view once was in epistemology. The list of contemporary epistemologists that he quotes includes William Alston, Laurence Bonjour, Roderick Chisholm, Richard Foley, Alvin Goldman, Keith Lehrer, Paul Moser, Alvin Plantinga, and Ernest Sosa. For further general discussion of the topic of epistemic value, see Pritchard (2007) and Carter, Pritchard & Turri (2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a fairly representative sample of recent detractors when it comes to the idea that truth is the fundamental epistemic good, see Williams (2000, *passim*), Millar (2011), Kvanvig (2003, *passim*; 2013), Kelp (2014), and Elgin (2017, *passim*).

<sup>3</sup> Note that calling truth the fundamental *epistemic* good can be potentially misleading. After all, on this view, the nature of the epistemic is demarcated by its relationship to truth, and hence there is a sense in which truth cannot be itself an *epistemic* good (i.e., as opposed to being the good that the epistemic realm is concerned with). Nonetheless, it ought to be harmless to talk in this way so long as this point is borne in mind. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Synthese* pressing me on this question.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of EVTm as I am here articulating it, see Pritchard (2011; 2014*b*; 2016*a*; 2016*c*). What I am here calling EVTm is sometimes referred to as *veritism*, following Goldman (e.g., 1999, *passim*; 2002). As terminology, however, veritism brings with it certain theoretical baggage, as it is closely associated with a wider reliabilist epistemological programme (some of this baggage, and its import to our concerns, will become apparent in due course). Accordingly, I will opt for the much uglier terminology advanced here.

<sup>5</sup> As famously discussed in Sosa (2003), for example.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Lynch (2009) defends this line. See also David (2005). Even some commentators who ultimately don't adopt this approach to the problem, such as Sosa (2003), nonetheless claim that it is at least a defensible line to take.

<sup>7</sup> There are lots of presentations of this general problem for EVTm in the literature, but for a very clear articulation of the problem, see DePaul (2001, §2). For a recent discussion of this problem, see Treanor (2018).

<sup>8</sup> For some recent defences of this general line, see Williamson (2000), Millar (2011), and Kelp (2014; 2018).

<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true in the case of Goldman (e.g., 1999, *passim*; 2002), for example, who simultaneously advances both reliabilism and EVTm (or *veritism*, as he calls it—see endnote 3). For an early, and influential, statement of the swamping problem as primarily targeting reliabilism in particular, see Zagzebski (2000; cf. Zagzebski 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Though note that, *modulo* my comments a moment ago, Zagzebski (2000; cf. Zagzebski 2003) in fact pitched the swamping problem as being primarily a problem for reliabilism in epistemology, rather than for the account of epistemic value that reliabilism is most associated with. For more discussion of this point, see Pritchard (2011).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Kvanvig (2003) defends a pluralistic account of epistemic value, in part in response to a version of the swamping problem.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Greco's (2010) influential virtue-theoretic account of knowledge that incorporates an account of the value of knowledge that turns on its status as a kind of cognitive achievement, whereby it inherits the broadly ethical value of achievements more generally.

<sup>13</sup> I develop these points in more detail in Pritchard (2011; 2016*c*).

<sup>14</sup> For example, drawing on Williamson (2000), in recent work Millar (2011) and Kelp (2014) have defended the idea that knowledge is the goal of inquiry, and thus what legitimately closes inquiry. See Pritchard (2016*b*) for a critical discussion of this claim. See also Kelp (2018), which defends the idea that inquiry aims at understanding while contending that this is compatible with treating knowledge as the goal of inquiry.

<sup>15</sup> The literature in question here is vast, but one can get a good sense of some of the main contours of it by consulting Alfano, Greco & Turri (2017). For my own take on these issues, see Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, chs. 1-4).

<sup>16</sup> For an influential proposal of this kind, see Kvanvig (2003). See also Zagzebski (2000; 2003).

<sup>17</sup> The conception of the intellectual virtues that I offer is broadly neo-Aristotelian, in line with Zagzebski's (1996, *passim*) influential work in this regard. For more on the notion of an intellectual virtue more generally, see Battaly (2014). See also Baehr (2011).

<sup>18</sup> One potential problem for this way of thinking about intellectual virtues as essentially involving a desire for the truth is that on the face of it there are some plausible intellectual virtues don't seem to demand this. Curiosity is often cited in this regard—for example, can't one manifest the intellectual virtue of curiosity just by idly asking questions, regardless of whether one is seeking (much less valuing) the truth by doing so? (Whitcomb 2010; Baehr 2011) I think that we need to distinguish here between curiosity construed in a broad sense as a kind of general disposition to inquire, and curiosity in the narrower sense that involves the manifestation of intellectual virtue. The former might not involve a desire for the truth (indeed, and relatedly, it might involve the manifestation of intellectual vice), but the latter most certainly does. For more on this point, see Lewis (2018). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Synthese* pressing me on this question.

<sup>19</sup> Note that in saying that the intellectual virtues are essentially active cognitive skills it does not follow that they are essentially reflective in their application; the active element instead concerns the motivational state involved. In particular,

if one's intellectual virtue of being observant is second nature, then no reflection need be involved (though characteristically the intellectual virtues do demand reflection, since they need to be cultivated).

<sup>20</sup> Another alternative, of course, would be to argue that the intellectual virtues do not have a love of truth as a motivational requirement at all, but something else, such as, in this case, a love of knowledge. Naturally, it would take us too far afield to explore all these dialectical alternatives here.

<sup>21</sup> I owe the phraseology employed here to Zagzebski (1996, *passim*). I think that this point also explains why it is so important to 'see things for oneself', where by this I mean both in the perceptual and in the intellectual sense. For further discussion, see Pritchard (2016*b*). For a recent articulation of an opposing view, whereby to care about cognitive contact with reality is to care about something other than the truth, see Ranalli (2019).

<sup>22</sup> For the sake of argument, I set aside here the question of whether the relevant propositional attitude in play is better characterized as a guess rather than a belief.

<sup>23</sup> This way of thinking about epistemic value can also explain why certain radical sceptical scenarios are epistemically problematic, even though the subject concerned has lots of true beliefs. Consider the protagonist in the film *The Truman Show*, for example, who is unbeknownst to him living on a TV set. A great deal of his beliefs are true, and yet his conception of his relationship to the world around him is fundamentally awry. If thinking of the fundamental epistemic good as truth was simply a matter of counting true propositions, then it would be unclear what is so problematic, from a purely epistemic point of view, about this character's epistemic situation. Viewed in terms of the alternative virtue-theoretic account of truth as the fundamental epistemic good advocated here, however, and it becomes very clear why it is problematic, which is that his cognitive grip on reality is in fact very limited, even despite his many true beliefs.

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion of the contrast between knowledge and understanding in play here, see Pritchard (2009; 2014*a*) and Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 4).

<sup>25</sup> For more on this point in the specific context of Elgin's (2017) recent attack on the centrality of truth to the scientific enterprise, see Pritchard (2019).

<sup>26</sup> A further theoretical pay-off from this virtue-theoretic account of epistemic value is that it enables us to make better sense of the notion of ignorance, *qua* the fundamental epistemic ill. For more on this point, including an explanation of why the standard accounts of ignorance in the literature are problematic, see Pritchard (*forthcoming*).

<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous referees for *Synthese* who provided detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Mark Fiocco and Chris Ranalli. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Value of Truth' conference, which was held at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, in November 2018, and I am grateful to the audience for their comments on the paper.