Phil. 244: Epistemic Normativity
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Truth as the Primary Epistemic Goal

I. The Truth-Goal as the Ultimate End of Epistemic Justification

Loosely speaking, David characterizes the truth-goal as follows:

> *the truth-goal* = the goal of *believing truths and not believing falsehoods*.

Thus this goal has two parts: a positive part (*believing truths*) and a negative part (*not believing falsehoods*).

> (As David admits, "truth-goal" is a less-than-ideal name, since it deemphasizes the negative part.)

Why care about the truth-goal? Because many epistemologists hold *a goal-oriented approach to epistemic justification* (i.e. *a teleological approach to justification*), together with the thought that the goal in question is the truth-goal.

According to David, the combination of these two ideas leads to the following thesis:

> (G)   S's being justified/unjustified in believing P somehow amounts to S's believing P being a good/bad thing relative to the truth-goal.

Why endorse a teleological approach to epistemic justification?

> David sketches a quick argument that he finds in Alston:

> > "It is generally agreed that being justified is an evaluative concept of some sort: To say that believing *p* is justified or unjustified is to evaluate believing *p*, in some sense, as a good thing or as [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" (p. 154).

> Two problems with this argument:

> - The first step of the argument equivocates. Sometimes "evaluative" means "pertaining to evaluation," and sometimes it means "pertaining to value." Nearly everyone agrees that *being justified* is evaluative in the first sense. But what Alston/David need for their argument is that *being justified* is evaluative in the second sense, which is much more controversial.

> - The second step of the argument is inconclusive. Even if *being justified* is an evaluative notion (in the second sense), it doesn't follow that we need to understand the goodness of being justified along teleological lines (i.e. in terms of a goal that is promoted).

Why think the goal in question is the truth-goal?

> The main alternative proposal that David considers is:

> > *the knowledge-goal* = the goal of *knowing truths and not believing falsehoods*.

> David's argument against taking the knowledge-goal to be the primary epistemic goal (pp. 153-154):

> > Since knowledge is justified true belief plus a de-Gettierizing condition, and since TRUTH and BELIEF are not epistemic concepts, the main task of epistemology is to give a theory of justification. The teleological approach to justification connects JUSTIFICATION with the non-epistemic concept TRUE BELIEF, and in this way provides a non-epistemic "anchor" for theorizing about justification. A teleological approach in terms of the knowledge-goal would not be able to do this, since KNOWLEDGE is already itself an epistemic concept.

> A tidier version of David's argument: "Since *knowledge obtains partially in virtue of justified belief*, we can't say that *a belief is justified in virtue of its being a good thing relative to the knowledge-goal*, on pain of circularity."

II. Do We All Have the Truth-Goal?

Do humans actually possess the truth-goal? More importantly, is a teleological account of justification along the lines of (G) committed to the following desire-thesis (D)?

> (D)   S cannot be justified/unjustified in believing anything at any time, unless S desires *believing truths and not believing falsehoods* at that time.

Two interpretative points:

- Here David is assuming the following: *S has it as one of her goals that it be the case that p* iff *S desires that p*. But if we reject this account of what a goal comes to, it is easy enough to reformulate (D) accordingly.

- The desire in (D) needs to be understood as a *standing desire*, not a *conscious desire*.

David thinks that if epistemologists who endorse (G) are also committed to (D), then they're in trouble:

> *worry #1*: "The claim that all of 'us' ... have such a standing desire for truth appears to be a somewhat daring empirical claim about human psychology" (p. 155). If that empirical claim doesn't pan out, then—given (D)—those of us without that desire don't have justified beliefs.

> *worry #2*: "...it seems there could in principle be a person who never had a standing or even an implicit desire for truth (or who lost it for a time). Wouldn't the beliefs of such a person (at such a time) still be justified/unjustified? By my lights, the answer to this is yes" (p. 156).

David considers, and rejects, various ways of responding to this problem:

- *option #1*: Hold that we *ought* to desire *believing truths and not believing falsehoods*, even if in fact we don't.

  David's objection: In what sense ought we to have this desire? This is not plausibly a pragmatic or moral "ought." And if we construe the "ought" in terms of rationality or reasonableness, then the claim only follows [*why?*] if, and because, it is rational or reasonable to believe that having true beliefs will help secure our other goals [*huh?*]. But then the "ought" is epistemic, so we can't use the truth-goal to anchor epistemic concepts in non-epistemic concepts.

- *option #2*: Reformulate (D) so that all that is needed is that S's belief-forming faculties were designed to aim at the truth.

  David's objection: If evolution designed our belief-forming faculties, it is unlikely that they were designed to provide us with *true beliefs*, rather than *reproductive-fitness-enhancing beliefs*.

- *option #3*: A person's beliefs can be epistemically evaluated relative to a goal that person does not have, as long as there are enough people who actually have the truth-goal to sustain a general practice of using concepts like JUSTIFICATION for evaluative purposes.

  David's objection: "It could have been that all humans lacked the desire for truth. In that case, there would have been no practice of evaluating beliefs as good or bad relative to the truth-goal.... But wouldn't our beliefs still be justified/unjustified?" (p. 157).

David instead endorses a "naturalistic" response (pp. 157-158) that I find inscrutable (and also find, insofar as I can scrute it, to rest on implausible assumptions concerning *the relation between concepts and properties* and *what it takes for a concept/property to be evaluative*).

However, there is another response that David does not consider:

- *option #4*: Hold onto (G) but deny (D), on the grounds that a goal can structure a norm that applies to an agent without actually being a goal the agent possesses.

An analogy: hedonistic utilitarianism holds that the norms governing what we ought to do are structured around the goal of *attaining pleasure and avoiding pain*, but it is no objection to this view that some people do not desire pleasure and that some people are not averse to pain.

III. What is the Content of the Truth-Goal?

The most natural way of understanding the content of the truth-goal:

$$(T) \qquad (\forall \text{proposition P that S can grasp})(\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})$$

Note that this is only equivalent to the earlier loose characterization of the truth-goal if we assume bivalence (i.e. assume that every proposition is either true or false).

> If bivalence fails, there is an interesting question of how best to generalize (T). Is the truth-goal silent with respect to propositions that are neither true nor false, or is the goal to have a third doxastic state toward the neither-true-nor-false propositions that is neither belief nor disbelief?

David consider, and rejects, a number of alternative suggestions for the content of the truth-goal:

- *alternative #1 (Chisholm)*: $(\forall \text{proposition P that S considers})(\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})$

  reason in favor: You might think the right-to-left direction in (T) is too ambitious a goal.

  David's objection: We can have justification for propositions we do not believe and have never considered, and for beliefs we acquired willy-nilly, without ever having considered the propositions involved.

- *alternative #2*: $(\forall \text{proposition P})[\text{S considers P} \; \Box\!\!\rightarrow \; (\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})]$

  reason in favor: Avoids objection to alternative #1.

  David's objection: You may be justified in holding beliefs which, on consideration, you would reject on bad grounds (say, because considering things tends to bring out the raving skeptic in you).

- *alternative #3*: $(\forall \text{proposition P that is somewhat important to S})(\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})$

  reason in favor: Avoids worries about trivial truths. (Recall Sosa in the waiting room.)

  David's objection: Even our most unimportant beliefs can be justified/unjustified.

- *alternative #4 (Alston)*: Having a large body of beliefs with as high *a ratio of true to false beliefs* as possible.

  David's objection: Then someone with a large body of beliefs that are all true could not possess justification for an additional truth she does not believe, since adding a belief in that truth wouldn't help with the truth-ratio of her body of beliefs.

Eventually David concludes that (T) is in fact the best interpretation of the content of the truth-goal, provided that we want the truth-goal to anchor our account of justification via (G).

Final issue: there are two ways of understanding the attitude involved in the truth-goal (where "G(...)" = "there is a goal of making it the case that ..."):

> *the collective truth-goal*: $\quad G[(\forall \text{proposition P that S can grasp})(\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})]$

> *the distributive truth-goal*: $\quad (\forall \text{proposition P that S can grasp})[G(\text{S believes P} \leftrightarrow \text{P is true})]$

David on why we should prefer the first of these over the second: "The second ascribes to you a vast number of goals, not all of which you can have" (p. 165).

> Three problems with this argument:
>
> - We just saw that (G) is best interpreted without a commitment to (D), so the issue of whether an agent can possess these goals is beside the point.
>
> - On some conceptions of what it is to have a goal, we can have an infinite number of goals.
>
> - The collective goal has to be interpreted as being *differentially realizable*: for each proposition that satisfies "S believes ... ↔ ... is true," one does better in pursuing that goal. But when interpreted in that way, the collective goal is arguably equivalent to the distributive one.

IV. The *Reductio* Argument

How should we understand "a good/bad thing relative to the truth-goal" in (G)?

> David's suggestion: "something that *promotes* the truth-goal, in that it is a *means* to reaching that goal."

David argues (pp. 160-161) that what's at issue in (G) can't be whether S's believing <*p*> is a *causal means* to reaching a *diachronic* truth-goal; rather, it must be a *constitutive means* to reaching a *synchronic* truth-goal.

> (Let's grant this to David for now; we'll discuss this issue in much more depth in two weeks.)

But then an advocate of (G) must address the following objection (p. 161):

> *the reductio argument*: When (G) is interpreted in this way, justification collapses into truth.
>
>> If S truly believes P, then S's belief in P is a constitutive means of fulfilling the synchronic truth-goal with respect to P, so—by (G)—S's belief in P is justified.
>>
>> And if S falsely believes P, then S's belief in P is a constitutive means of flouting the synchronic truth-goal with respect to P, so—by (G)—S's belief in P is unjustified.
>>
>> But surely there can be unjustified true beliefs, and surely there can be justified false beliefs.

The first half of this objection is the more worrisome half: while there are a few brave souls who defend the view that all justified beliefs are true, I know of no one who defends the view that all true beliefs are justified.

> Maitzen offers a version of the *reductio* argument in his article, but unfortunately Maitzen's version relies on David Lyons' old argument that rule-utilitarianism and act-utilitarianism are extensionally equivalent, and it is now widely agreed that Lyons' argument fails.

Some responses to the *reductio* argument that David does not put much stock in (pp. 162-164):

  I.   Block the *reductio* by disconnecting justification from truth.

> *David's objection*: This involves renouncing (G), so we have given up on our promising strategy for getting a theoretical handle on justification.

  II. Block the *reductio* by setting up a second goal for justification to promote.

> *David's objection*: The second half of the *reductio* still goes through: a false belief fails in the truth-goal even it does well in the second goal, so all false beliefs will be unjustified.
>
> [Whether this is so depends on (*i*) how we weigh success in the truth-goal against success in the second goal when assessing overall success with respect to both goals, and (*ii*) how much overall success is needed for a belief to be justified.]

  III. Block the *reductio* by reconceiving the relation between justification and the truth-goal.

> *David's objection*: David considers and rejects one proposal along these lines due to Chisholm.

David's preferred response to the *reductio* argument is to reinterpret (T) subjunctively:

> (T*)   (∀proposition P that S can grasp)[(S believes P □→ P is true) & (P is true □→ S believes P)]

In English: for every proposition P that S can grasp, if S were to believe P, then P would be true, and if P were true, then S would believe P.

> *note*: This move only blocks the *reductio* if we reject the standard Lewis-Stalnaker truth-conditions for subjunctive conditionals.

Another way of blocking the *reductio* that David does not consider: "Even if S's belief in P fulfills the truth-goal with respect to P, it might compromise the truth-goal with respect to other propositions, so every true belief need not be justified according to (G). And for parallel reasons, every false belief need not be unjustified."