

Against Epistemic Teleology, Pt. 2

I. Introduction

An extremely widely held picture among contemporary epistemologists:

- i. We have certain *epistemic goals* or *ends* (such as the twin goals of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones).
- ii. All other normative notions in epistemology (such as *what we ought to believe*, *what we have sufficient reason to believe*, and *what we are justified in believing*) are ultimately explicable in terms of how well the objects of assessment conduce toward, promote, or otherwise subserve our epistemic goals.

This is the analogue in first-order epistemology of *consequentialist* or *teleological* approaches to first-order ethics.

The goal of my paper: to convince you that this widely held picture is misguided.

II. Characterizing Consequentialism/Teleology

Current terms: “consequentialist” vs. “deontological” ethical theories (Anscombe 1958).

Older terms: “teleological” vs. “deontological” ethical theories (Broad 1930).

I primarily use the term “teleology” rather than “consequentialism,” since “epistemic consequentialism” is liable to cause confusion in a way that “epistemic teleology” does not.

What is distinctive of the teleological/consequentialist perspective: (i) the good is prior to the right, and (ii) all value is “to be promoted.”

More precisely, we can break any teleological theory into three basic components:

1. *a theory of final value* – specifies certain states of affairs that have value/disvalue as ends [or equivalently: specifies certain ultimate goals/aims that structure the norms under consideration];
2. *a theory of overall value* – for each *evaluative focal point* [acts, motives, rules, etc.], specifies a comparative ranking of every item that falls within that evaluative focal point in terms of how well it *conduces toward* or *promotes* the items in (1) above;
3. *a deontic theory* – for each *deontic focal point* [acts, motives, rules, etc.], assigns deontic properties [being obligatory/permitted, being justified/unjustified, etc.] on the basis of (2) above.

Two examples of teleological ethical theories:

- *maximizing hedonistic act-utilitarianism*:

1. *theory of final value*:

Pleasurable experiences have *final value*.
Painful experiences have *final disvalue*.
Nothing else has *final value* or *disvalue*.

2. *theory of overall value*:

S’s ϕ -ing at time t has *more overall value* than S’s ψ -ing at t iff [the net balance of pleasure over pain that would be brought about if S ϕ -s at $t >$ the net balance of pleasure over pain that would be brought about if S ψ -s at t].

3. *deontic theory*:

S’s ϕ -ing at time t is *right* iff no other act available to S at t has more overall value.

- *satisficing hedonistic motive-utilitarianism*:
 1. *theory of final value*:
 - Pleasurable experiences have *final value*.
 - Painful experiences have *final disvalue*.
 - Nothing else has *final value* or *disvalue*.
 2. *theory of overall value*:
 - Motive-set m_1 has *more overall value* than motive-set m_2 iff, on average, m_1 leads to a greater balance of pleasure over pain in the world than m_2 does.
 3. *deontic theory*:
 - Motive-set m is *right* iff [m 's overall value \geq threshold T].
 - S's ϕ -ing at time t is *right* iff the motive-set that caused S to ϕ at t is right.

An example of a teleological epistemic theory:

- *(simplified) process reliabilism*:
 1. *theory of final value*:
 - True beliefs have *final epistemic value*.
 - False beliefs have *final epistemic disvalue*.
 - Nothing else has *final epistemic value* or *disvalue*.
 2. *theory of overall value*:
 - Belief-forming process b_1 has *more overall epistemic value* than belief-forming process b_2 iff, on average, b_1 yields a greater ratio of true to false beliefs than b_2 does.
 3. *deontic theory*:
 - Belief-forming process b is *reliable* iff [b 's overall epistemic value \geq threshold T].
 - S's belief that p at time t is *justified* iff the belief-forming process that caused S to believe that p at t is reliable.

III. The Pervasiveness of Teleology in Contemporary Epistemology

Most *externalists about epistemic justification* are teleologists:

Alvin Goldman: "...true belief is the ultimate value in the epistemic sphere ... The principal relation that epistemic virtues bear to the core epistemic value will be a teleological or consequentialist one. A process, trait, or action is an epistemic virtue to the extent that it tends to produce, generate, or promote (roughly) true belief" (2001: 32, 31).

But many of the most prominent *internalists about epistemic justification* are also teleologists:

Laurence Bonjour: "What makes us cognitive beings at all is our capacity for belief, and the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is *truth*: we want our beliefs to correctly and accurately depict the world. ... The basic role of justification is that of a *means* to truth, a more directly attainable mediating link between our subjective starting point and our objective goal. ... The distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification is thus its essential or internal relation to the cognitive goal of truth" (1985: 7-8).

Richard Foley: All rationality is goal-oriented, and epistemic rationality is rationality in service of the goal of "now believing those propositions that are true and now not believing those propositions that are false" (1993: 19).

Indeed, with a few notable exceptions, the recent debate between internalists and externalists in epistemology can be seen as an in-house dispute among teleologists.

IV. Ethical Trade-Offs and the Separateness of Persons

One of ethical teleology's greatest virtues and greatest vices: its countenancing of trade-offs in its determination of what we should do.

Why a virtue: teleological ethical theories can easily explain why, in a large number of cases, allowing or prescribing a trade-off strikes most of us as the correct result.

Why a vice: this countenancing of trade-offs gives rise to a host of intuitive counterexamples (McCloskey's sheriff, Foot's serum, Thomson's fat man on the footbridge, and so on).

When these trade-offs are inter-personal, the familiar refrain is that teleological ethical theories ignore "the separateness of persons" by permitting or requiring such trade-offs.

V. Epistemic Trade-Offs and the Separateness of Propositions

veritism = a theory of final value according to which: (i) true beliefs have final epistemic value; (ii) false beliefs have final epistemic disvalue; (iii) nothing else has final epistemic value or disvalue.

I first develop my argument against teleological epistemic theories that include veritism as their first component, and then generalize.

side note #1: Veritism neither entails, nor is entailed by, the view that beliefs "aim at the truth."

side note #2: The goals featured in a teleological theory's theory of final value need not be held by the subjects/agents being assessed in terms of that theory.

Step 1: *The argument against veritistic teleological epistemic theories.*

The basic problem with veritistic theories: they allow for trade-offs between our epistemic goals with regards to different propositions.

example: Roderick Firth's grant-seeking scientist, who can sacrifice her pursuit of the truth with regards to one proposition in order to greatly facilitate her pursuit of the truth with regards to a large number of other propositions.

The lesson of this example: when determining the epistemic status of a belief in a given proposition, it is epistemically irrelevant whether or not that belief conduces (either directly or indirectly) toward the promotion of true belief and the avoidance of false belief in *other* propositions beyond the one in question.

In flouting this fact, veritistic theories ignore "the separateness of propositions."

- *response #1:* Restrict the conducing relation so that only *constitutive means* (and not *causal means*) count as a way of conducing toward or promoting items of final epistemic value.

two minor worries: Seems *ad hoc*. Also, most currently-defended teleological epistemic theories (such as process reliabilism) do allow for causal means.

- *response #2:* Move to a *time-relative* version of veritism, according to which our fundamental epistemic goals are (i) to *now* believe a proposition if it is *now* true, and (ii) to *now* not believe a proposition if it is *now* false.

two minor worries: Seems *ad hoc*. Also, deliberation takes time: when I deliberate about whether to believe a given proposition, this is a continuous process that takes place across a series of distinct *now*'s.

Even if we grant to the teleologist that either (or both) of these responses is defensible, the basic problem still remains.

When forming beliefs (whether automatically or on the basis of explicit reasoning), we rarely acquire beliefs one at a time; instead, we tend to acquire batteries of interconnected beliefs.

If one of these batteries of beliefs contains an inevitable false belief but also many true beliefs, then accepting that battery of beliefs could be a *constitutive means* of sacrificing our veritistic aims with regard to one proposition in order to *at the same time* further our veritistic aims with regard to a large number of other propositions.

example #1: A person who, after realizing that three propositions she has always found compelling are in fact jointly inconsistent, continues to believe all three propositions, thereby sacrificing one false belief in order to hold onto two true beliefs.

example #2: A person who comes to believe *that the number of stars in the sky is even* by guessing, but who also at the same time forms a large number of accurate higher-order beliefs about this belief and the way in which it was formed.

(Assumption needed for this example: higher-order beliefs are partially constituted by the lower-order beliefs which they are about.)

Step 2: *Generalizing the argument.*

Case A: Teleological theories that deem *true beliefs* to have final epistemic value and *false beliefs* to have final epistemic disvalue, but also deem other items (such as *coherent belief-systems*, or *understanding*, or *wisdom*) to have final epistemic value.

The same sorts of cases show that these theories flout the separateness of propositions.

Case B: Teleological theories that don't accept that *true beliefs* have final epistemic value (and/or don't accept that *false beliefs* have final epistemic disvalue).

For most theories of this sort, the bearers of final epistemic value are cognitive states (such as *knowledge* or *understanding*) that one can attain with respect to one proposition (or domain of inquiry) while not attaining with respect to other propositions (or domains of inquiry).

So these theories will also flout (something like) the separateness of propositions.

VI. Conclusion: Beyond Truth-Conducivity

What's the alternative to a teleological approach to epistemic normativity?

A number of alternatives already exist in the literature. Two examples:

- a. evidentialism + a non-teleological theory of evidence;
- b. Broome-style wide-scope rational requirements.

What's the theoretical pay-off once we renounce epistemic teleology?

The teleological approach to epistemic normativity is so pervasive that "... is epistemically justified" has almost become synonymous with "... is truth-conducive."

So when people ask, "Are *intuitions* trustworthy?" or "Do we have good reason to believe the results of *reflective equilibrium*?" or "Is *inference to the best explanation* a way of acquiring justified beliefs?" they often take these to be questions about whether these belief sources tend to result in mostly true beliefs.

But showing, in a non-question-begging manner, that one of these belief sources tends to result in mostly true beliefs is extremely difficult (if not impossible).

My hope: moving to a non-teleological conception of epistemic normativity will make some of these problems more tractable.