Phil. 244: Epistemic Normativity
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The Value of True Belief

I. Kornblith on the Value of True Beliefs

Last time we discussed the sense in which "Knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief" is true.

A presupposition of the debate: "True beliefs are valuable." Today we focus on the sense in which this is true.

Two natural ideas:

- True beliefs have instrumental value.
- True beliefs have final epistemic value.

Kornblith can be read as arguing that the second of these is true *because* the first is true. How can that be so?

> True beliefs have final epistemic value ≠ true beliefs have epistemic final value.

> Compare when we evaluate a decision as "financially wise." Here the final end with regards to which things are evaluated is that of making money, even though making money is not itself of final value.

> Similarly, true beliefs might be the final end with regards to which things are evaluated epistemically, even if they themselves are not of final value.

Kornblith's proposal: Among our cognitive states, true beliefs are *uniquely* and *universally* instrumentally valuable: no matter what goals you have, having true beliefs will best help you achieve those goals.

Because of this, epistemic norms are structured around the goal of acquiring true beliefs.

Thus, for Kornblith, epistemic norms are hypothetical but universal: they apply to us in virtue of our possessing certain goals, but they apply to us as long as we possess at least one goal (which, we may suppose, is always the case).

> Kornblith is concerned to defend this view because he wants a way of grounding epistemic norms that is compatible with his commitment to two forms of naturalism:

>> *methodological naturalism*: Philosophy should be continuous with the natural sciences, both in the (less radical) sense that results from the natural sciences should inform our philosophical theorizing, and in the (more radical) sense that the methodology of philosophical inquiry should be essentially the same as the methodology of the natural sciences.

>> *substantive naturalism*: Nothing exists other than the sorts of objects, facts, properties, and relations studied by the natural sciences.

> However, it is far from clear that Kornblith makes good on his commitment in this article. Worries:

>> 1. His argument appears to use traditional *a priori* means of reasoning, without any appeal to the results of science (nor could it, given that he needs his conclusion to hold universally, regardless of what the contingent facts are like).

>> 2. Kornblith seems to be assuming that we get instrumental normativity "for free." But this is now a largely discredited view. So even if he can explain how epistemic norms are merely a variety of instrumental norm, he still needs to explain how we can account for the normativity of instrumental norms within a starkly scientific worldview.

Nevertheless, Kornblith's proposal is of obvious interest, even for those who are not naturalistically inclined.

II. Kornblith's Argument

Some initial reasons to be skeptical of Kornblith's claim that true beliefs are always instrumentally valuable, no matter what goals one has:

- Sometimes a false belief can be beneficial: mistaking the time of your flight, you avoid the airplane crash. [Though in this case a true belief about whether plane was in danger would also have helped.]

- More generally, it might benefit a creature to have a number of false positives when forming beliefs about whether that rustle in the underbrush is a predator.

- There is empirical evidence that a majority of us think we are above average in a variety of respects (better than average drivers, better looking than average, healthier than average, less obnoxious than average when using a cell phone, etc.). One plausible explanation for why we routinely overrate ourselves in this way: these false beliefs are instrumentally valuable.

Kornblith uses a position Stephen Stich once defended as a foil for his argument:

> *Stich's proposal*: "[E]pistemic evaluation is just the determination of the extent to which our cognitive states or processes are conducive to the totality of things we value intrinsically [i.e. value as ends in themselves]" (p. 367).

Let's suppose that the only thing we desire as an end in itself is happiness ("for we are terribly simple folk").

Then let's compare two cognitive systems:

> C_T = a cognitive system that gets high marks when true belief is taken to be the ultimate end of epistemic appraisal (i.e. a truth-conducive cognitive system).

> C_H = a cognitive system that gets high marks when happiness is taken to be the ultimate end of epistemic appraisal (i.e. a happiness-conducive cognitive system);

Suppose C_T and C_H are both trying to decide which of two toasters to buy. They both perform a cost-benefit analysis and reach a conclusion:

> C_T will form a *belief about which toaster it will best serve our interests to buy* that is true.

> C_H will form a *belief about which toaster it will best serve our interests to buy* that best conduces toward our happiness.

According to Kornblith, these cannot be the same belief, since Stich's whole point is that his proposal yields different results from a traditional truth-conducive account.

So, Kornblith concludes, C_H "will not tell us accurately what will, all things considered, serve our interests, but instead what would make us happiest to believe will, all things considered, serve our interests" (p. 371). Thus C_T better serves our interests than C_H.

> Kornblith gestures at how the argument would be generalized to establish that C_T is not just better than C_H, but better than any competitor that fails to treat true belief as an end in epistemic appraisal: "we need to make evaluations of alternative courses of action and, whatever we care about, we need these evaluations to be done accurately, i.e. by a cognitive system that generates truths" (p. 372).

I must confess that I find this argument baffling. Some worries about it:

- I fail to see how C_T's belief will be more instrumentally valuable than C_H's belief. Recall that we have stipulated that the only end that matters, ultimately, is happiness. Thus we have:

> C_T will form a *belief about which toaster it will best conduce toward our happiness to buy* that is true.

> C_H will form a *belief about which toaster it will best conduce toward our happiness to buy* that best conduces toward our happiness.

Thus it looks like, by definition, C_H's belief is maximally instrumentally valuable.

> Insofar as C_T's belief will conduce toward our happiness by allowing us to buy *the toaster that it will best conduce toward our happiness to buy*, C_H's calculation will already take this into account. And if C_T's and C_H's beliefs will conduce toward (or away from) our happiness in other ways, then C_H's calculation will take this into account, but C_T's won't.

> So either C_T and C_H will form the same belief, or C_H's belief will be more instrumentally valuable.

- The argument, at best, shows why, if one has any goals at all, then there are *some* true beliefs that are instrumentally valuable. But what Kornblith needs to show is that, if one has any goals at all, then *every* true belief is instrumentally valuable.

  > For example, if my only goal is to count blades of grass in Harvard Yard, I don't see how having a true belief about the continuum hypothesis will help me achieve this goal.

  > [Maybe Kornblith could appeal here to Cliffordian ideas about the interconnectedness of all beliefs, no matter how seemingly trivial or seemingly isolated.]

- The generalizing stage of Kornblith's argument is not as easy as he makes it out to be. He needs to show that *the goal of acquiring true beliefs* is not just better than *the goal of acquiring happiness-conducive beliefs*, but also better than *the goal of acquiring knowledge*, *the goal of acquiring empirically adequate beliefs*, etc.

III. Sosa on Desiring the True

Two attractive ideas:

i. We value/desire [NB: *Sosa apparently takes these to be equivalent*] the truth as such.

ii. Knowledge requires that one's belief be motivated by a desire for the truth as such.

The first half of Sosa's article is devoted to trying to find a way of understanding the desire for truth as such that makes both of these ideas come out as true.

Two clarifications Sosa quickly makes:

- *What we value is not truth itself, but rather our grasping of the truth through belief*.

  For example, we value *our truly believing that Venus orbits the Sun*, not *its being true that Venus orbits the Sun*. "Some truths are good, but not all; far from it" (p. 49).

- *We desire the truth as such, not the truth for its own sake*.

  What does this distinction come to?

  > *Sosa's example*: I might want a key with a certain brand etched on it, but not *as such*. What I want *as such* (but not *for its own sake*) is a key that will open the target door.

Sosa considers a number of proposals for what *a desire for the truth as such* might come to:

- *proposal #1*: We want to believe every truth.

  the problem of trivial truths: If I want something and realize that I can get it at little or no cost, then (other things being equal) I will try to do so. But when I'm stuck in the dentist's waiting room with nothing to do but reach for the telephone book and start memorizing numbers (all the magazines are missing), I feel no inclination to do so.

  A standard way of dealing with this problem that Sosa does not put much stock in: restrict our desire so that it only pertains to *significant* truths.

- *proposal #2*: We want *our beliefs to be true*, in the way in which we want *our walks to be safe* (rather than in the way in which we want *our sins to be repented* or *our meals to be delicious*).

  the problem of unwanted truths: If I believe that a dear friend is terminally ill, I do *not* want that belief to be true.

  A response Sosa doesn't consider: I do indeed have a *pro tanto* desire that my belief be true (grounded in my general desire to believe the truth), but it is outweighed by a much stronger *pro tanto* desire that my belief not be true (grounded in my feelings for my friend).

- *proposal #3*: We want *our beliefs to be safe*, so that the following subjunctive conditional is true for each belief that p: $<Bp \;\square\!\!\rightarrow p>$ (that is, if one were to believe that p, then it would be true that p) (that is, one would believe that p only if it were true that p).

  the problem of guidance: This desire can't motivate me to believe $<p>$, since ("minor exceptions aside") one doesn't believe $<Bp \;\square\!\!\rightarrow p>$ unless one already believes $<p>$.

- *proposal #4*: When we get interested in the question whether p, we want the following:

  (D) $<(p \rightarrow Bp) \;\&\; (\neg p \rightarrow B\neg p)>$

  the problem of unsettling beliefs: Let $<c> = <$My parents care for me at least slightly$>$. Then a belief that not-c might be so painful that I desire the following, rather than the relevant instance of (D_1):

  (C) $<(c \rightarrow Bc) \;\&\; (\neg c \rightarrow Bc)>$

  Nevertheless, if I have an abundance of compelling evidence for $<c>$ and no evidence against it, I might know $<c>$. So it can't be a requirement on knowledge that it be motivated by a desire for the truth as such, on this understanding of what that amounts to.

- *proposal #5*: When we get interested in the question whether p, we want the following:

  (D′) $<p \supset Bp>$

  the problem of unwanted truths (redux): Let $<h> = <$I have a headache$>$. Then we can reason as follows:

  > I want $<$not-$h>$.
  > So, I want $<$not-$h \lor Bh>$.
  > So, I want $<h \supset Bh>$.

  But a desire to avoid a headache is not a desire for the truth as such.

  reply: The first inference is dubious. Alf Ross' example: if I want *that a certain letter is mailed*, it doesn't follow that I want (or that it is rational for me to want) *that either the letter is mailed or it is burnt*.

- There are several more variants of these proposals (for example, involving subjunctive conditionals instead of indicative conditionals), but similar problems arise for all of them.

In the end, Sosa concludes that there is no way of approaching the issue in terms of specific questions that interest us and correlated desires for the truth as such that can allow us to hold onto both of our attractive ideas (i) and (ii).

Sosa proposes that instead we focus not on *true beliefs*, but on *truth-conducive practices*, where "practice" is a term of art encompassing "methods, or rules, or policies, or virtues that lead to ... belief" (p. 54).

> This confused me, since it seems that all of the problems that arose for *true beliefs* can also arise for *truth-conducive practices*: for example, the practice of forming beliefs about random numbers in a telephone book seems just as problematic as an individual belief formed as a result of such a practice.

Sosa's eventual conclusion: behind every fully justified belief lies a practical syllogism whose main governing principle reflects the practice of aiming for truth, where that practice is constitutive of one's first nature.