Truth, Value and Epistemic Expressivism
Michael P. Lynch
Forthcoming: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research

A familiar view in ethical theory is that ethical claims do not literally describe the world; they do not – in at least one sense – state facts. Rather, they express our sentiments, or emotional attitudes, or convey our moral stances and commitments. Variations on this view are now legion.¹ I’ll call this general family of views expressivism.

Expressivism, isn’t confined to ethics. One might adopt it towards any type of value and claims about that value.² In this paper, I want to examine whether we can adopt it towards the value of truth. I shall argue that we lack any standpoint from which we can make expressivism about the value of truth intelligible. This turns out to tell us something important both about truth and about value.

1. True belief as an End of Inquiry
The assertion that “truth is a value” can encompass quite different claims. In this paper, I am primarily interested in the value of true beliefs. It is true beliefs we have in mind when we say that truth is an epistemic goal. That is, believing what is true is a proper end of inquiry.³ By “inquiry” I mean, first, the range of epistemic practices we engage in when asking and answering questions about matters ranging from the sublime to the mundane. Sincere answers to questions express beliefs. Hence the widely held view that, inquiry, as Peirce colorfully put it, is “a struggle to attain a state of belief”.⁴

¹ Varieties include: Stevenson (1937); Ayer (1952); Blackburn (1993; 1998); Gibbard (1990); Timmons (1998); Drier (1999).

² As Blackburn’s work (1993) demonstrates.

³ Note that I say “a” not “the”. I remain neutral on whether true belief is the only aim of inquiry; See DePaul (2001).

⁴ Readers of Peirce will note that the fuller point made here is: “The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle inquiry” (5.374). Some have noted that this seems to suggest two independent goals of inquiry: the quelling of doubt and the attainment of belief (see, e.g. Frankfurt 1958). I won’t attempt to offer any interpretation here; I only note that Peirce clearly thought that inquiry involved figuring out what to believe.
When I say that true belief is a “proper” end of inquiry, I mean that true belief is something that is worth pursuing, whether we in fact desire to pursue it. Truth, as A. E. Houseman remarked, often seems the faintest of human passions. Some may want the truth all of the time, and all may want it some of the time, but not all will want it all of the time. The truth, as we often say, can hurt.

So how exactly are we to characterize the end in question? In order to address our main question, which concerns the proper meta-normative stance we should take towards the value of the end of truth, we need not reach a completely settled answer to this question. Nonetheless some preliminary clarification is in order.

A natural way of putting the point is that it is good to believe what is true. And that seems right, until one recalls that, we shouldn’t just believe what is true; we should also avoid error. It is not just good to believe the truth, then, it is good to not believe what is not true; that is, it is good to believe only the truth. Thus one might suggest that

(TE): It is prima facie good that one believes all and only what is true.

Here “good” qualifies a general state of affairs: the state of affairs of believing all and only true propositions. Note that (TE) does not say that it is good for one’s actual beliefs to be true. One’s actual beliefs might be absurd. The point is that it is good to believe whatever turns out to be true and only what is true. Nor, for the reason noted above, does it say that we want to believe what is true and only what is true.

The intuitive thought behind (TE) runs on all fours with the thought that it is prima facie good to be omniscient. And that seems plausible; it is good to be the king, but better to be God. Understood in this way, however, the value of truth is too much of an ideal. Humans aren’t gods, and no human can believe everything that is true. Accordingly, it seems to make sense to relativize the truth-goal to a restricted set of propositions:

(TG): It is prima facie good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true.5

5 Here I am influenced by Ernest Sosa (2001) and Marian David, whose work on this matter has influenced (and provoked) me in numerous helpful ways; see David (2003); see also my reply to David (2005) in Lynch, 2005. Unpacking the embedded modality here will be tricky, but the point should be clear.
In other words: it is prima facie good to believe all and only the truth on any question that could come to hand. Note that (TG) doesn’t say that it is good for the propositions that I actually consider to be true. Rather, the point is that it is good, relative to the set of propositions I am able to consider, that I believe all and only those that are true.6

According to (TG), the state of affairs of believing what is true and only what is true on any matter that might come to hand is always good; but it is always prima facie or pro tanto good.7 Something is good in this way when there is always something to say for it; when it is good considered by itself but not necessarily good all things considered. Almost everything that is good is prima facie good. Keeping a promise, for example, is always good other things being equal; but it is best to break a date to save the ubiquitous drowning child. Likewise, while it is always good that one believe only the truth, it is not always good all things considered. This reflects the fact that while truth is a value, it is not our only value; and sometimes our values, whether they are cognitive or moral, conflict. Thus it might be good, all things considered, to believe something false, when for example, it is justified by the evidence. And not only are there good falsehoods, there are also bad truths. There are all sorts of trivial truths that are not worth believing given my limited intellect and time. Nonetheless, were these limits not in place – were it to be the case that believing the truth was completely cost-free so to speak – then it would be good to believe all and only what is true. And that is just to say that believing what is true is a prima facie or pro tanto good.8

When we are talking about the aims of a practice or set of practices—like those we typically engage in during inquiry—we should distinguish between the ultimate value that governs the practice and the more

6 (TG) and (TE) are obviously different: one is an absolute ideal; the other is relativized to propositions I able to consider. But intuitively, (TG) is justified by (TE). For unless it were good to believe all and only what is true, it would be difficult to see why it would be good to believe all and only what is true on any matter that comes to hand. That is, if the unrestricted ideal was not good, it is hard to see how restricting it could be.

7 For present purposes, I am not distinguishing these types of good.

8 For more remarks on the structural relationships between the value of truth and other values, see Lynch 2004, chapter 4.
immediate aims that are justified in light of this value. In saying that true belief is a proper end of inquiry, we take it to be an aim of inquiry in the first sense. An individual inquirer rarely has (TG) as a conscious aim in her everyday epistemological life. And even when she does, she cannot achieve that end – in the sense of (TG) – directly. One does not simply will oneself to believe the truth. Rather, we pursue truth indirectly, by pursuing those beliefs backed by reasons and supported by the evidence. Yet these more practical and immediate goals only make sense in the light of our commitment to the value of truth. If we were not committed to the goodness of believing what is true, then the pursuit of justification would be unimportant. We pursue the truth indirectly by directly pursuing – aiming at – justification.

One might wonder about what sort of goodness is involved in (TG). This is a complex question that we need not answer fully here. Instead, let us note that it is at least initially plausible to think that true belief is not a moral good, because what is morally good is generally either a subject or object of direct responsibility. But believing what is true and only what is true is not something we are directly responsible for. What we are directly responsible for is how we go about pursuing the truth (or not) in our everyday epistemic life. Thus in the sense described by (TG), truth seems better described as an epistemic or, if you prefer, a cognitive good.

Before passing on to talk about the proper meta-epistemological stance we should take to the value of true beliefs, it will be helpful to briefly note that there is another sense in which truth is a value. The second idea we might be talking about when discussing the value of truth is the value of an individual belief’s being true. This is presumably what James was thinking of when he noted that truth is the good in the way of belief (1975, 42). Her might have better said that truth is the right in the way of belief; for the idea here is that true beliefs are right or correct. That is,

(TN): It is prima facie correct to believe \(<p>\) if and only if \(<p>\) is true.

The difference between (TN) and (TG) is important. While (TG) ascribed value to a general state of affairs – the state of affairs of believing all and only what is true, (TN) ascribes value – what I’m here calling “correctness”
to the act of believing what is true. Nonetheless, there are similarities between the two principles as well. Here too the value in question seems more cognitive than moral. While I can be responsible for how I go about forming beliefs, I am not, strictly speaking, responsible for the belief itself.\(^\text{10}\) And believing what is true, while always correct, is again always prima facie or defeasibly correct; other norms may operate on belief.\(^\text{11}\)

(TN) has seemed to a wide range of philosophers to be a truism (Boghossian 2003; Velleman 2000; Shah 2003; Wedgewood 2002). Even so, it tells us at several important things. First, as widely agreed by numerous commentators, it tells us something about belief. Namely, it tells us that the basic norm or standard of correctness for belief is truth.

There are, I think, three basic reasons to believe this. First, the fact that truth is a norm of correctness for believing is part of what distinguishes believing from other cognitive attitudes. Imagining, assuming, and hoping, for example, are each governed by norms – assumptions can be justified or not, imaginings can be sharp or vague, hopes can be rational or irrational. But neither imagining that p, assuming that p, nor hoping that p are properly evaluated in terms of truth. Believing is.

Second, believing that p is not only properly evaluated in terms of the truth of <p>, it is indirectly responsive to its being true. In the typical conscious, deliberative case, it is so by via being directly responsive to evidence for <p> (Shah, 2003). And this suggests, third, that truth is not just a norm of belief, it is a basic norm. For we take it to be correct to believe what is based on evidence because beliefs based on evidence are likely to

\(^{10}\) I use the word “correct” here to help us distinguish (TN) from (TG). But don’t be misled by the thought that what is correct is always an action. Beliefs aren’t actions, at least in the obvious sense of that term. I can’t, for example, simply will myself to believe that George Bush isn’t President in the direct way I can will myself to raise my arm. Thus in saying that it is correct to for you to believe that p when it is true, I am not to be understood as saying that your true beliefs are actions done well. So on one reading, what (TN) says is that the state of affairs of believing the truth that p is good.

\(^{11}\) Thus, justification and rationality for example, are normative, and they operate over belief. Moreover, they can conflict with the norm of truth – what is justified isn’t always true. Nor is believing what is false always irrational. To say that they operate on truth, however, doesn’t mean they are as basic a norm as truth with regard to belief. See note 11 below.
be true, and thus the value of truth in this sense is more basic than the value of believing what is based on evidence.\textsuperscript{12}

Since the fact that truth is the norm of belief serves to distinguish belief from other cognitive attitudes, we should conclude that part of what it is to believe that p is to have one’s beliefs governed by the norm of truth. And since this norm seems more basic than the demand to believe what is justified or based on evidence, it is plausible that (TN) is a necessary, constitutive fact about belief.\textsuperscript{13}

The nature and explanation for this fact is another matter. One explanation, raised by Velleman (2000), is that it is explained by the allegedly further fact that truth is an aim of belief, where the existence of this aim might itself be explained in various ways. But this explanation founders on the fact that it is difficult to cash in the metaphor except as another way of stating (1). For in saying that beliefs aim at the truth, we can’t be saying that in deciding what to believe, I must somehow expend effort in \textit{trying to believe} what is true. This means that in the literal sense of the word “aim” truth is not an aim or goal of belief. It is not something beliefs strive for.\textsuperscript{14} As Ralph Wedgewood notes, beliefs aren’t little archers aimed at truth (2002, 267).

Recently Shah (2003) and Velleman and Shah (forthcoming) have offered a simpler explanation: (TN) is a straightforward conceptual truth. As Velleman earlier put it:

The concept of belief just is the concept of an attitude for which there is such a thing as correctness or incorrectness, consisting in

\textsuperscript{12} This point also illustrates the difficulty in maintaining that epistemic rationality or justification is an \textit{equally basic} norm of believing as truth. For to maintain that view, one would have to deny the what makes it correct to believe what is justified or epistemically rational is that justified beliefs are likely to be true. In other words, one would have to deny the seemingly necessary link between the value of justification and justification’s truth-conduciveness. For more on this score, see Lynch 2004. Note that this issue, which concerns which norms are basic on \textit{acts} of belief, is distinct from the issue of whether there are other goals of \textit{inquiry} besides having true beliefs. For this latter issue, discussed further below, see DePaul (2001) and David (2001).

\textsuperscript{13} More might say more cautiously: it is a constitutive fact about full-fledged beliefs: perhaps animals might have proto-belief states without being subject to any norms, no matter how trivial. I leave this difficulty to one side here.

\textsuperscript{14} Marian David (2005) and Nishi Shah (2003) both make this point.
truth or falsity. For a propositional attitude to be a belief just is, in part, for it to be capable of going right or wrong by being true or false (Velleman, 2000, 16).

The thought here contains two components. One we’ve already seen: part of what it is for x to be a belief is for x to have truth as its norm of correctness. But two, this is a conceptual truth. Thus, presumably, any competent user of the concept accepts (TN). And consequently, as Shah (2003) suggests, one accepts the “authority of truth over one’s cognition when one views it as a belief” (2003, 474).

For purposes of this discussion, we don’t need to endorse or reject Shah and Velleman’s view that (TN) is a conceptual, analytic truth. We need only agree to the more widely held claim cited earlier that (TN) states a constitutive fact about belief. This by itself secures us two further points. First, that whether or not (TN) is accepted (let alone accepted because it is analytic), if it is true, and one has beliefs, then one rationally ought to accept it.16 Believing, we might say, normatively commits one to (TN). Second, where “K” names some cognitive attitude or activity,

Necessarily, an instance of K’ing counts as believing only if: it is prima facie correct to K that p if and only it is true that p.

In other words, it is a necessary condition for being a belief that the cognition in question satisfies (TN). Again, whether or not this is a conceptual truth, or a surd metaphysical fact about belief, we can leave to one side.

The last fact (TN) tells us is less commented on, but equally important. Not only does (TN) tell us something about belief, it tells us something about truth, namely that truth, just is, in part, a basic norm of correctness for belief. Truth and belief are clearly interrelated. And so it seems that if (TN) is a constitutive fact about belief, then it is also a constitutive fact about truth. Here Dummett’s old analogy of truth and winning is on the mark: The fact that the aim of a game is to win is not just

15 Note that if it is a conceptual truth, it is not because “x is a correct belief” and “x is a true belief” are synonymous.

16 Or, if you like: one ought to accept it if one can (that is, if one has the cognitive capacity to do so). “Accept” here can be read as conscious acknowledgment of belief.
a fact about games; it is also a fact about winning. Similarly, the fact that the aim of belief is truth is not just a fact about belief; it is a fact about truth. Of course, the nature and explanation of this fact, like its sister fact about belief, is a matter of dispute.  

Although they are distinct claims, (TN) and (TG) are interdependent. One connection between them consists in the structure of their justification (Lynch 2005a; cf. David 2005; McGrath 2005). But they are also connected in terms of how commitment to one can drag in its wake commitment to the other. We’ve noted that (TN) implies that truth constitutes a normative standard for belief. A consequence of truth being a normative standard of belief is that the having of that property plays a regulative role for any practice that aims at producing belief. Since inquiry is just such a practice, truth plays a regulative role for inquiry. A property P plays a regulative role in a practice when, just by virtue of participating in that practice, one is normatively committed to regulating one’s moves in the practice by one’s judgments about what has or lacks that property (Wedgewood, 2002, 268). Thus the property of being a winning chess move is regulative of chess: in playing chess I am committed to regulating my moves by my judgments of what is or isn’t a winning move. Likewise, in figuring out what to believe – that is, when engaging in inquiry – I am committed to regulating my doxastic practices by my judgments about what is or isn’t true. Indeed, I am regulated by the truth in inquiry in the most direct possible way: the recognition that p is true is a decisive reason to believe it (Shah, 2003).

It is a quick step between being committed to doing what is correct and being committed to the goodness of that which is correct. If my action is morally correct just when what I do is right, then clearly, if I engage in moral deliberation, that is, I am trying to figure out what to do, morally speaking, my activity is governed by the principle that it is good to do what is right. Engagement in a goal-directed practice commits me to the value of the goal I so pursue. Likewise, if my believing is cognitively correct just when what I believe is true, then if I am engaged in inquiry, that is, I am trying to figure out what to believe, then I am normatively committed to my doxastic practices being governed by (TG). Call this the trivial connection principle: If I am committed to (TN), and I engage in inquiry, I am committed to (TG).

---

17 See Lynch (2004a) and (2005) for an argument to the effect that it implies that truth is a normative property.
2. **Expressivism about the goal of truth**

The above brief discussion hardly settles all the questions one might ask about the value of truth, even in the “goal” sense principally under consideration. Various quibbles remain.\(^{18}\) But the main issues are on the table; and with these preliminary matters dispensed with, I now turn to our chief question: can one be an expressivist about the value of true beliefs?

*Explicit* endorsements of the position are perhaps rare, but the literature indicates that there are numerous sympathizers.\(^{19}\) Hartry Field, in his recent work, perhaps comes the closest, so I’ll take him as my stalking horse. Field’s meta-epistemological view, which he calls “evaluativism”, emerges out of a general stance on normative notions similar to Gibbard’s “norm-expressivism” (1990). In particular, Field’s view is that epistemic reasonableness is an “evaluative property, in a way incompatible with its being straightforwardly factual” (2001, 370). Reasonableness is not a straightforwardly factual property on Field’s view because beliefs are not simply reasonable or unreasonable full stop; they are reasonable relative to our epistemic values – what he calls our epistemic goals. Consequently, it is misleading to say that some standards of reasonableness are strictly correct and others incorrect. Rather, “what we can say is that some standards are better than others in achieving certain goals” (2001, 383). Crucially, however, “there is no further fact here – no fact about non-relativized oughts, or about which of the [goals] we might relativize to is ‘objectively correct’” (2001, 248). *That is, there is no question of whether one goal is objectively better than another.* Goals simply are. As he says,

There are no constraints on what one’s epistemological goals ought to be: nothing makes it wrong for a person not to care about achieving truth and avoiding falsehood but adopting beliefs that will make him feel good about his cultural origins” (Field; 2001, 385).

---

\(^{18}\) For further complications, see McGrath (2005), David (2005); Sosa (2001) and Lynch (2005)

\(^{19}\) Implicit endorsements, however, are easier to come by. Gibbard’s own recent (2003) work, while aimed at the norm of truth or (TN), can be read as suggesting a position towards the goal of truth along Field’s lines. Shah (2003, 480-481) also makes remarks that may indicated he is sympathetic with an expressivism about (TG); see also Shah and Velleman (forthcoming).
Presumably therefore, Field would say that (TG) is not, as he puts it, “objectively correct”. That is, there is no objective fact of the matter about whether it is good to believe all and only what is true on any matter at hand. In calling that goal “good” I may be doing a number of things, including expressing my preferences, or signaling my approval or perhaps simply attempting to browbeat others into adopting it (2001, 385). But one thing I am not doing is describing an objective fact about it.

So Field’s meta-epistemology has two principle components. The first is a relativized account of reasonableness, according to which a belief’s possession of which is relative to some epistemic goal. I will not comment on this aspect of the position here. Rather, I want to focus on the second component, namely the thesis that there is no objective fact of the matter about which epistemic goal is the right one. The property of being a good epistemic goal, in Field’s terms, is a completely nonfactual property.

The position has the advantages of any expressivist theory. In particular, and as Field himself suggests, it provides a way of understanding how our talk about the value of truth makes sense in light of over-arching naturalist commitments. And yet she can grant that a naturalist reduction of the values of truth is neither possible nor necessary (371). The expressivist can argue that the naturalist need not fear the values of truth because the values of truth usher in no new facts, natural or otherwise, but only new pro-attitudes, desires or sentiments. Nonetheless, from within our cognitive and epistemic practices, the expressivist can agree that “some standards are better than others” in that they lead to more truth than falsehood (382).

This last point illustrates an important – and familiar—general fact: contemporary expressivists, whether about moral or epistemic value, typically engage in a two-stance approach to their subject. One stance is the stance we take when we employ evaluative language. Thus, from what Mark Timmons usefully calls the morally engaged standpoint, (1998, 150-151) the moral expressivist can affirm all that the realist can affirm. She can say that slavery is wrong, and moreover, that it has the property wrongness. If she is a minimalist or deflationist about truth (see Timmons, 1998 and Blackburn 1998) she can go farther still and assert that it is true that slavery is wrong. The thought is that expressivism carries over the T-schema. That is, as Field himself points out, “for given that truth is disquotational, the norms license calling an evaluative claim true to precisely the extent they license the evaluative claim itself” (2001, 249). Thus, whatever attitude I
express when affirming that slavery is wrong, I can also express by saying it is true that it is wrong (see Blackburn 1998, 78-79).

The expressivist, however, also employs another stance in regarding morality – what Timmons calls the *morally disengaged standpoint*. This is the stance from which the expressivist wishes to “give a story about how ethical thought functions” (Blackburn, 1998, 49). From this vantage point, the expressivist insists that evaluative thought and language look very different than the realist believes. Theorists describe the difference differently, saying variously that evaluative claims don’t aim to represent, or describe, they don’t express beliefs; they don’t correspond to the mind-independent world, or simply “they are neither true nor false” (Timmons, 151). But however it is cashed out, this need for a second stance is clear: it allows the expressivist to speak with the vulgar while still maintaining what is distinctive about her position – namely a form of meta-ethical skepticism or irrealism about value, one which affirms that, e.g. “ethical properties of things are constructed precisely in order to reflect our concerns” (Ibid., 80).

So according to the contemporary expressivist, from the engaged standpoint, slavery is wrong and so is anyone who believes otherwise. But from the disengaged standpoint, from which we are not using but explaining evaluative thought and language, differing moral ends are on a par factually speaking. As Timmons puts it, there is no moral FACT – no mind-independent, objective fact—of the matter about which moral outlook is correct (Timmons, 1998, 152).

It is clear that Field holds a similar two-stance position about epistemic value. From what we might call the *epistemically committed standpoint* – that is, from the position from which one has chosen one’s epistemic goals – the epistemic expressivist affirms that desiring to have true beliefs is better than not doing so (Field, 2001, 382). But from the *epistemically disengaged standpoint*, expressivism about the value of true belief is clearly a form of irrealism about that value. From that standpoint, abstracting from all epistemic goals, there simply is no “objective fact” of the matter whether true beliefs are better than false ones. Field’s point in using the word “objective” here is precisely to signal that he is making a claim from the epistemically disengaged standpoint – from the standpoint where we are explaining our epistemic evaluations, not engaging in them.

Again, the need for this second stance is clear. In order to state the view, the epistemic expressivist must abstract from her own commitment to her epistemic goals, to rise above them, as it were. She needs to do this in
order to say that they are neither objectively correct or incorrect. And note – if we are to be able to understand the position, let alone agree with it, we must be able to accomplish this same feat. We must be able to reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint.

It is right here, I think, that the epistemic expressivist encounters a problem. For there are serious reasons to think that, whatever we might say in the moral case, the epistemically disengaged standpoint is an illusion. It is a view from nowhere to nowhere.

In order to make sense of the idea of the morally disengaged standpoint, the moral expressivist asks us to consider people who have very different moral ends than our own. For it is by considering this possibility that we are able to perform the necessary “disengagement” from our own moral ends and view them with a critical eye. And indeed this is not impossible. The pitiable track of human history forces us to confront folks with radically different moral ends. We may not consider these different ends morally good, but we recognize them, however demented, as distinct moral ends. It is not that Osama Bin Laden has no morals; it is that he has the wrong ones.

Similarly, if we are to make sense of the epistemically disengaged standpoint, we need to consider the possibility of someone having distinct epistemic ends that don’t include true belief. This would be to say that someone could engage in inquiry without being committed to (TG). But there is good reason to think we can’t do this; “inquiry” whose aims don’t include true belief isn’t bad inquiry; it is not inquiry at all.

Let us try to imagine someone who engages in inquiry and yet isn’t committed to (TG). To make the matter easier, let us localize the case, and imagine someone who isn’t committed to (TG) with regard to some particular subject. Now to engage in inquiry, we’ve said, is to engage in various practices of asking and answering questions in order to figure out what to believe. So we’ll try to imagine someone who pursues questions and answers about some subject but who, we’ll stipulate, is not committed to (TG) – at least with regard to that subject.

Consider King George, who often expresses deep concern about the state of his realm to his experts and advisors. He asks about his subjects’ welfare, how the war is going, whether his tax scheme is fair and so on. Yet when hearing any statement about the state of the realm, King George responds only by either raising or lowering his thumb. As it happens, he invariably raises his thumb to all and only those propositions that he perceives as reinforcing his decisions and cohering with those that he has
given the thumbs-up to in the past, and he lowers his thumb to those that he
believes do not. Let us say that King George “accepts” the propositions to
which he gives the thumbs-up, and “rejects” the rest. Moreover, let’s
stipulate that his practice in this regard he is normatively committed to the
following goal or principle, incompatible with (TG):

\[(FG): \text{It is good, relative to those propositions about the state of his}
\text{realm, that King George accept all and only those propositions that}
\text{reinforce his decisions and cohere with those that do.}\]

Here’s the question: in listening to his experts and advisors and then
“accepting” some statements and “rejecting” others, is King George
engaging in inquiry about his realm?

We earlier noted that it is platitudinous that to engage in inquiry is to
figure out what to believe. So let’s first consider whether in accepting that p
(giving it the thumbs-up) at some time, George believes that p at that time.\(^{20}\)
Above we noted that a cognition counts as a belief only if it satisfies (TN).
Thus, whether King George’s acceptances constitute beliefs hangs on
whether they would satisfy an appropriate analogue of (TN) – that is,
whether it would be the case that his acceptances are prima facie correct if
and only if the proposition so accepted is true.

Suppose, as seems plausible, that his acceptances do not satisfy
(TN); they are not correct when and only when true, but are ruled by some
other standard. If so, then they don’t count as beliefs. Yet someone who
isn’t forming beliefs about some subject isn’t trying to figure out what to
believe about that subject. And someone who isn’t figuring out what to
believe isn’t engaging in inquiry.\(^{21}\)

Suppose on the other hand, that King George’s acceptances do have
truth as their standard of correctness; they satisfy (TN). This might be, for
example, if George held that acceptances were an infallible mark of what
was true. If so, then we might count them as beliefs (King George certainly

\(^{20}\) An entirely different question is whether King George could \textit{come to believe}, over time, what he accepts.

\(^{21}\) Note that the result doesn’t change when we consider the case from George’s internal
perspective: If George isn’t committed to (TN) with regard to his acceptances, then, were
he to reflect on the matter, he is under no obligation to consider them beliefs. And someone
who doesn’t consider himself as believing isn’t figuring out what to believe. And someone
who isn’t figuring out what to believe isn’t engaging in inquiry.
would) – assuming that is, they were able to satisfy whatever other conditions we might place on belief. In any event, if, for whatever reason, George’s acceptances are in fact real beliefs, then George is committed to (TN). And the trivial connection principle tells us that if one is committed to (TN) and engages in inquiry then one is committed to (TG). Thus, applying this principle to our localized example, if George is committed to (TN) with regard to his acceptance of propositions about the state of the realm and engages in inquiry about that subject, then he must be committed to (TG) about it. But by hypothesis, George is not committed to (TG) with regard to questions about the state of the realm. He is committed to (FG), a principle that given certain obvious assumptions about truth, is inconsistent with (TG). Consequently we know that either he isn’t committed to (TN) relative to his accepting propositions about the state of the realm (in which case, as we just saw, he can’t conceive of those acceptances as beliefs and hence isn’t engaging in inquiry) or he doesn’t engage in inquiry about the realm. Consequently, if George isn’t committed to (TG), then whether or not he counts his acceptances as beliefs, he isn’t engaging in inquiry.

The intuitive point here is this. To see George as believing what he accepts, is to see his acceptances as correct when and only when what he accepts is true. If we don’t see his acceptances that way, his acceptances are not beliefs, and although he isn’t governed by (TG), we can’t conceive of him as engaging in inquiry. On the other hand, given the trivial connection principle, if we do see his acceptances as beliefs (hence taking (TN) as true of them) and we take his “investigations” that lead to them to be a form of inquiry, then we must understand those practices as governed by (TG). Even more briefly: to engage in inquiry is to try and figure out what to believe. But it seems that George is not trying to figure out what to believe about the state of his realm but engaging in something more like an elaborate game of wishful thinking. Intuitively, whatever he is doing, George isn’t engaging in inquiry.

Of course, nothing just said rules out the likely possibility that he may seem to do so – he may go through the motions in the way that many

---

22 We know this because classical logic ensures that (P & Q) → R; ¬R ∴ ¬P or ¬Q.

23 What if King George believes that his acceptances constitute what is true? In that case, he will certainly regard his acceptances as beliefs, (and we might as well). Moreover, he will, no doubt, think of himself as figuring out what to believe (engaging in inquiry). And, were his theory of truth correct, he would in fact be doing so. Poor George, that theory of truth is not correct.
language students in high-school often go through the motions of learning the language (memorizing conjugations and so on) but with the aim of merely putting the right symbols on the page in order to pass the test. But just as these students aren’t aiming to understand, e.g. French, so George isn’t engaging in inquiry about the state of his realm.

One might retort that the above example is too fanciful. Isn’t a more reasonable example the thought that someone could engage in inquiry with only the goal of having a coherent belief system, or having epistemically rational or justified beliefs?

No doubt, people can and do have such goals in pursuing inquiry. The question is whether they can pursue these goals – coherent belief systems or rational beliefs – without also including (TG) among them. Thus the question here isn’t whether one can have more than one goal of inquiry. Rather, the question, as I put it earlier, is whether we can conceive of someone who has distinct epistemic goals that don’t include among them the goal of having true beliefs.

Of course, the typical way of understanding inquiry does require that it have only one goal: truth (see David 2001). The thought here is that the value of achieving, e.g. a coherent belief system lies in the fact that doing so is instrumental to believing what is true and not believing the false. That is, we strive to have coherent beliefs because we think coherent beliefs are likely to be true. If we didn’t think this, it seems unlikely that we would care whether our beliefs were coherent. But of course if this is how we see the matter, having the goal of coherence or justification presupposes having the goal of true belief. Whether or not this is plausible, however, our present point does not hang on it. For even if we reject the thought that all the goals of inquiry must ultimately be explained in terms of the goal of true belief, (DePaul, 2001) we can consistently endorse (TG) as a goal of inquiry. To do so would be to hold that e.g. it is a good state of affairs to believe all and only what is true, but it is even better to believe what is true and what is coherent with the rest of one’s belief system. But this plausible-sounding principle is not what the epistemic expressivist needs to be able to make sense of the epistemically disengaged standpoint. What they need to make sense of, again, is the thought that one could engage in inquiry without having truth as even part of one’s epistemic goals. And that is what the above argument challenges.

Another, more radical, line of objection would be to simply reject the platitude that inquiry is the struggle of figuring out what to believe. Perhaps one might hold that inquiry is the practice of satisfying certain
desires, or – to invoke another Peircian thought – the activity of removing doubt, where this is conceived of as not provoking one to believe that such and such is the case. If so, then George’s (FG) might well number among the goals of inquiry so conceived. I leave it to the reader to decide for him or herself how plausible it is to deny that inquiry is a matter of figuring out what to believe. In my own case, I am not sure what it would mean. For I am not sure what it would mean to engage in sincere inquiry into whether, e.g. I left my keys in the car where that doesn’t involve my figuring out whether I did or did not, and consequently figuring out what to believe about the matter.

Since neither of these objections is anywhere close to being decisive, I conclude that the above line of argument offers good prima facie evidence that where one is uncommitted to (TG), one does not engage in inquiry. Hence it weighs against the thought that we can readily conceive of different epistemic ends that don’t include among them the goal of believing what’s true. And that is just to say that we can’t meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals, which in turn means that we can’t reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint. Yet if we can’t reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint, then it is unclear how we can even make sense of epistemic expressivism.

I’ll forestall for the moment drawing more general lessons from this conclusion. In the next section, I consider and reply to objections.

3. Further Objections and Responses

1. The fact that we can’t conceive of distinct epistemic goals that don’t include truth hinges only on mere “stipulations about the meaning of ‘epistemological goal’ and ‘belief’” (Field; 2001, 385).

Two points seem pertinent. First, it isn’t at all obvious that the above arguments need to be understood as being about the meanings of “inquiry” or “belief” or “language”. As we noted earlier, (TN) and what follows from it needn’t be thought of as conceptual truths. One could take such points to be about inquiry and belief rather than “inquiry” and “belief”. Cooking aims to produce food; comedy aims to produce laughter. Likewise, one might think, inquiry aims to produce true beliefs. It is a fact about such practices that they cannot be separated from their aims; their aims are partly constitutive of them. Accordingly, the internal connections between truth, belief and inquiry are not mere stipulations.
Second, even if we were to grant that our arguments are conceptual in nature, then as concepts (or words) were involved at all, it is our ordinary concepts of inquiry and belief that are relevant, and those aren’t open to definition by stipulation. Moreover, if (TG) is a conceptual truth then it is necessarily true. And if so, then it is not clear how we are to consider the possibility that it is neither true nor false from the epistemically detached perspective.

2. Even if we can’t (if only because of these stipulations) conceive of distinct epistemic ends, we can still make the expressivist point. Some folks engage in schminquiry rather than inquiry and smelieve rather than believe. And there is no objective fact of the matter about that – about whether inquiry is better than schminquiry.

Taken straightforwardly, the question “why care about inquiry rather than schminquiry?” asks us to provide a reason, or justification for why inquiry is better than schminquiry. But as Field notes, I cannot give a non-circular justification of my belief that it is valuable to engage in inquiry; for in answering the question I am already committed to the value of the very practice in question. Consequently, he suggests (383), any justification for why inquiry is better than schminquiry would be “worthless”. And this, he seems to imply at points, gives an edge to an expressivist account of the value of true beliefs.

Certainly, it follows from the above that I can’t state, in an epistemically responsible way, what makes inquiry epistemically better than schminquiry. But it may be more valuable all the same. Moreover, that there is no fact of the matter which of inquiry or schminquiry is better isn’t the only or even best explanation of my inability to explicitly state such a fact. A simpler explanation is that one can assess something epistemically only from the epistemically engaged standpoint. To ask for a justification from the epistemically disengaged standpoint is to ask for nothing. Hence it is no surprise that I can’t state why inquiry is better than schminquiry without circularity.

It is worth noting here the difference between the questions: Why should we engage in inquiry? And Why should we engage in morality? In answering the latter question, we needn’t moralize. In attempting to say

---

why morality is worth caring about, we might even try to provide an argument for that conclusion with no explicitly moral premises (for example, if we try to justify morality in terms of self-interest). But in answering the former question – why engage in inquiry – we can’t help but engage in the very activity under question. Note that this is so even if I provide non-epistemic reasons for thinking that inquiry is better than schminquiry. No matter what sort of reason – moral, personal, whatever – that I offer on inquiry’s behalf, I pursue the truth about why it is better to pursue the truth, and hence implicitly commit myself to its pursuit.

Nor does it matter if we are expressivists about these other values. Even the moral expressivist, for example, will grant that there are moral facts in the minimal, deflationary sense, and will hold that I can adduce reasons and evidence for thinking that there is some moral fact of the matter about why inquiry is better than schminquiry. That is, she will not hold that our moral preference for inquiry is like our preference for chocolate ice cream. But as soon as we grant that there are some facts that decide the matter, however deflationary, and raise reasons on their behalf, we are already engaging in inquiry. This is just to state in other terms the lesson we learned above – we can’t abstract from our own epistemological engagement as we can in the moral case. The very process of abstraction is itself the problem: we can’t rationally inquire whether valuing inquiry is objectively more correct than not doing so, without already presupposing that it is.

Of course, in saying that the epistemically disengaged standpoint cannot be reached, I don’t deny the obvious fact that most of us don’t pursue the truth as much as we probably should, and that some of us don’t care about the truth at all. But someone who is radically hostile to the truth and inquiry isn’t then going to ask us for an epistemic justification for why it is good to have true beliefs. Such folks don’t care about reasons. Of course, this is not to say that we must remain mute around them, nor that we can’t summon perfectly good reasons to convince those who may still be on the fence. We can, and should.

25 Both Timmons (1998) and Blackburn (1998) argue that, e.g. moral expressivism is consistent with the existence of moral truth – where “truth” here means minimal deflationary truth, according to which, roughly, the truth predicate is a mere logical device for generalizing over, and endorsing, strings of sentences or propositions.

26 I have attempted to do so in Lynch 2004. My strategy was to aim show that there are constitutive connections between other values and the value of truth. See especially chapters 8, 9 and 10.
3. Your arguments rest on the assumption that (TN) expresses a fact about belief. But (TN) is ambiguous. On one reading it is a priori true but vacuous; on another it is a substantive empirical conjecture but unjustified. The a priori reading can only be that “true” and “correct” simply mean the same thing when applied to belief. So saying that a belief is correct when true is simply redundant. Nothing is said about belief (or truth) at all. On the other hand, if it means something like “the (biological) function of beliefs is to be true” then it is an empirical claim— and one for which you have given no support. Either way, (TN) can’t bear the weight you place on it.”

Of the horns of this supposed dilemma, I’ll gladly take the first. (TN) is a priori but not vacuous or trivial. For on the intended reading “it is correct to believe that p” and “the proposition that p is true” are obviously not merely two ways to say the same thing. For what is true is the propositional content of the belief, while what is correct is the believing of that content. Thus the two sides of (TN) state different facts; while (TN) as whole claims those facts are co-extensive.

The two sides of the biconditional remain unequivalent in meaning even when we convert the left-hand side into a claim about the proposition. “The proposition that p is correct to believe” and “the proposition that p is true” are, clearly, not stating the same fact about that proposition.

A second reason to think that (TN) is not a completely vacuous a priori truth is that one could argue that it is itself grounded on still more basic truths, and there could be disagreement on what these basing truths are. One might, for example, claim that (TN) is grounded on the fact that belief is made correct by being true. On this view, “correctness” is a property of belief over and above its truth: a belief’s correctness supervenes on it truth, in the way that some philosophers believe that an action’s moral correctness supervenes on its being conducive of pleasure of over-all utility. And obviously, the fact that doxastic correctness supervenes on truth in this way is a fact both about truth and about belief. On the other hand, a belief’s truth might be understood not as making a belief correct, nor as just another word for correctness, but as itself a species of correctness. On this view, truth is simply a type of normative property – it is correctness for belief in
just the way we might say that rightness is correctness for action. On this what (TN) tells us about belief is the simple but important fact that just as actions are morally correct just when they are right, so beliefs are doxastically correct when true.

So the alleged dilemma is a false dilemma. This is illustrated; finally, by the simple fact that there is a perfectly obvious a priori sense in which being true is the function of belief. Beliefs, we might say, are meant to be true just as desires are meant to be satisfied. Being true and being satisfied are what beliefs and desires do. This is not an empirical claim per se, although it is not an uninformative triviality either. And that, surely, makes it no different than most interesting philosophical claims.

4. You’ve only discussed being an expressivist about the value of true beliefs (TG). But wouldn’t an expressivist about the truth goal also be an expressivist about the truth norm (TN)? And wouldn’t that undercut your arguments, which seem to rely on (TN) itself being true?

Expressivism about (TN) amounts to saying that the normative import of ascribing truth to a belief is an expressive, rather than descriptive affair. The correctness of a true belief is not a property that the belief has per se, but an expression or projection of our own desires and sentiments. Thus, for example, a toy version of the view would take (TN) to mean:

\[(TNe): \text{Hooray for believing } \langle p \rangle \text{ if and only if } \langle p \rangle \text{ is true.}\]

Since the left hand-side (“Hooray for believing \langle p \rangle”) lacks truth-value, the whole of (TNe) presumably does as well. And this of course brings up the usual problems faced by expressivists, for at a minimum it demands an explanation for the two associated conditionals, that is:

\[(1) \text{Hooray for believing } \langle p \rangle \text{ if } \langle p \rangle \text{ is true.}\]

And (even more oddly)

\[(2) \langle p \rangle \text{ is true if hooray for believing } \langle p \rangle.\]

It is not clear what these statements mean, and thus they seem ill-suited to act in an analysis of (TN).
Yet this familiar type of worry is not the main problem facing the alethic expressivist. The main problem is that expressivism about (TN) is self-undermining. For in stating one’s expressivism, one is required to express a belief about expressivism, and in doing that, you again commit oneself to (TN). That is, to assert that,

\[(3): \text{(TN) is neither true nor false}\]

requires that you believe that (TN) is neither true nor false. But if (TN) is a constitutive fact about belief, then to believe that (TN) is neither true nor false in turn commits one to believing that the following instance of (TN):

\[(4): \text{It is correct to believe <(TN) is neither true nor false> if and only if <(TN) is neither true nor false> is true.}\]

Hence believing that (TN) is not true commits one to believing that it is true.\(^{27}\)

4. Conclusion
Our reflections suggest that unlike our other values, we cannot sufficiently abstract away from the value of truth in order to be skeptical about it. This tells us something about the goal of truth and about value. What it tells us about the goal of truth is that it is deeply rooted into our understanding of ourselves as curious animals, as believers, as thinkers. What it tells us about value is that we cannot, even if we wish to, take a skeptical attitude towards all of our values; towards some, certainly, but not towards all, or at least, not towards all at once. In particular, we cannot take an expressivist attitude towards the value of truth.

This does not mean that we have won the day for full-blooded realism about that value however. Nothing that we have said guarantees that we are right in thinking that it is good to have true beliefs. It is as if a philosopher were to argue there were no philosophical facts and that

\(^{27}\) For more on expressivism about (TN) see Shah and Velleman (forthcoming); Shah has suggested to me that one might avoid some of the troubling consequences of expressivism about (TN) by also accepting expressivism about belief-ascriptions. To me this seems to be jumping from the fire-pan into the fire. I discuss expressivism about (TN) at length in Lynch, forthcoming.
philosophical conclusions were only expressions of attitude. An oddly compelling position! But it is not one that we can ultimately take seriously, simply because we cannot perform the necessary abstraction from philosophy to make the point. In assessing the claim, we commit ourselves to the very practice under question. But that doesn’t mean there are philosophical facts. It only means we must think that there are. Similarly, if the above arguments are sound, we can’t seem to help thinking that there are at least some objective values, the values that constitute our very understanding of objectivity.  

Michael Patrick Lynch  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Connecticut  
U-2054  
Storrs, CT 06269  
mplynch@uconn.edu  

References  

28 Thanks (in no particular order) to Duncan Pritchard, Tom Bontly, Crispin Wright, Carrie Jenkins, Paul Bloomfield, Nishi Shah, Chase Wrenn, Tom Bontly, Patrick Greenough, Tom Polger, and an anonymous referee for this journal.
Harvard University Press.


