

Does Truth Have Epistemic Value?

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Introduction

What makes it reasonable for us to deploy our epistemic standards as we do?

A plausible answer: We think some kinds of belief are epistemically valuable. It's reasonable to think our standards favor those kinds of beliefs. That makes it reasonable for us to deploy them. This suggests a general pattern for rationalizing epistemic standards:

Teleological Pattern

1. It is reasonable to think the beliefs standard S recommends have Property P.
2. We want our beliefs to have, rather than lack, P.
3. So, it's reasonable for us to believe what S recommends (or to use S in guiding our belief).

A property has *epistemic value* if and only if it plays an essential role in explaining or rationalizing the deployment of epistemic standards. Playing the role of Property P in **Teleological Pattern** is an obvious way to have epistemic value.

Paul Horwich claims that truth lacks epistemic value in this sense.¹ Gurpreet Rattan disagrees.² Since both their views are unsatisfactory, I'll give an answer better than either of them.

Horwich and the Trivial Connection Between Truth and Epistemic Standards

According to Horwich, if we deployed our epistemic standards as means to the end of truth, then we'd need to refer to the goal of truth in rationalizing our deployment of them. He has two objections.

1. A circularity worry. **Teleological Pattern** invokes the reasonability of thinking our standards are truth-promoting, but such a judgment applies the very standards the pattern is supposed to rationalize.
2. A triviality worry. Horwich works this out in a few steps.

¹ Horwich, Paul. 2010. *Truth-Meaning-reality*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

² Rattan, Gurpreet. 2008. "On the Value and Nature of Truth." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 33 235–51.

- (a) Suppose it's reasonable to think the rule 'Believe that T' recommends a true belief. Then it's reasonable to believe *that T is true*, and so it is reasonable to believe *that T*. This is a consequence of the trivial equivalence of the proposition *that T is true* and the proposition *that T*. The desire for true beliefs plays no role in this explanation.
- (b) Let R(p) and R(c) be instances of a rule of inference's premise-schema and conclusion-schema respectively. If it's reasonable to believe R is truth-preserving, it's reasonable to believe $\langle R(p) \rangle$ is true only if $\langle R(c) \rangle$ is true.³ By the trivial equivalence, that means it's reasonable to believe $\langle R(p) \rangle$ only if R(c). The desire for true beliefs again plays no role.
- (c) Horwich conjectures that the above steps generalize to show that, in no case, need we appeal to a desire for truth to rationalize a rule of inference. It suffices that $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle is trivially equivalent to $\langle p \rangle$.

³ As is standard, angle-brackets form terms denoting propositions expressed by what is between them.

Horwich does allow one way desire for truth rationalizes deployment of our epistemic standards. It rationalizes our decision to engage in inquiry in the first place, and engaging in inquiry involves deploying epistemic standards. It's not that the desire for truth rationalizes the standards we deploy, but rather that it rationalizes our deployment of any standards in the first place.

Rattan and Critical Reflection

Three cases:

1. You read and immediately believe a news report that a hailstorm broke the City Hall skylights.
2. You read the report and believe it after conscientiously applying your epistemic standards (e.g., double-checking that it doesn't come from a hoax site).
3. You read the report and believe it after conscientiously applying epistemic standards you have conscientiously vetted for propriety (e.g., by not just considering whether it comes from a hoax site, but also why that matters).

Rattan points out that each case represents an epistemic improvement over the previous one. *Critical reflection* is his term for holding one's epistemic standards themselves up for evaluation or potential revision.

We need the concept of truth in order to engage in critical reflection. That, according to Rattan, will show that truth has epistemic value.

Against Horwich's circularity worry: Our basic epistemic standards are *entitlements*.⁴ We "rationalize" them by answering challenges to their cogency, not by giving a positive argument along the lines of **Teleological Pattern**.

⁴ Burge, T. 1993. "Content Preservation." *The Philosophical Review* 102 (4): 457–88.

Against Horwich's triviality worry: To make sense of a challenge to our standards and engage in critical reflection, we must employ the concept of truth and the idea that truth is a governing norm of belief. So, the desire for truth does play an essential role in explaining or rationalizing the deployment of our standards. It is what makes critical reflection possible in the first place.

Triviality's Revenge

We might want to explain or rationalize:

1. Our engagement in inquiry at all
2. Our believing what our epistemic standards recommend in inquiry
3. Our answering challenges to the reasonability of our epistemic standards.

Horwich says the desire for truth is involved in 1 but not 2, and he says nothing about 3. Rattan focuses on 3 as what makes truth's epistemic value evident.

Rattan is right that we need the concept TRUE to engage in critical reflection. And he is right (I'll grant for now) that our basic standards have the status of entitlements. But a triviality worry about critical reflection remains.

A Horwich-style argument: Any reason to think R is not truth-preserving is a reason not to construe $\langle R(p) \rangle$'s truth as a guarantee of $\langle R(c) \rangle$'s truth. But thanks to the trivial connection, those *just are* reasons not to infer $\langle R(c) \rangle$ from $\langle R(p) \rangle$. Challenges to the truth-promotion of our standards are automatically challenges to their reasonability, *without any need for a mediating desire for true belief*. So, Rattan's reply to Horwich's triviality worry doesn't work.

A dilemma: The desire for truth plays no essential role in critical reflection, but in critical reflection we are bound to evaluate our standards in light of truth-promotion. So is truth epistemically valuable or not?

The Truth

TRUE is essential to critical reflection because it is our means of expressing the sort of generality critical reflection requires.

Primitive propositional quantification achieves the same end, without any appearance of commitment to the a property of *truth*, valuable or not.

The question of truth's epistemic value comes down to what it means to "play an essential role in rationalizing or explaining the deployment of our episemic standards.

- The *desire for truth* can explain why we deploy standards at all, and perhaps why we are conscientious about it.
- The desire for truth does not rationalize our standards directly, nor does it play a role in framing or answering challenges to their cogency.
- But critical reflection does require the concept TRUE, because of its logical function, and not because *truth* has epistemic value.