

## Which Is Our Epistemic Goal?

This paper argues for the view that knowledge is the epistemic goal of cognition (that is, of cognitive acts producing beliefs); and, more specifically, it argues that the right reading of this view is a distributive reading. Because of this, it has two aims.

The first aim of this paper is to critically assess the received view, defended among others by William Alston [1985; 2005], Richard Foley [1992] and, more recently, by Marian David [2001]; that is, the view that the goal of cognition is roughly to amass a large body of (interesting) beliefs with a sufficiently high true to false ratio. In fact, this paper raises a number of worries for the received view, including the following two. First, the received view is multiply ambiguous, and its ambiguities can be at odds with intuition. For example, one may ask the following question: when should we attempt to amass the beliefs we ought to amass? Some may hold that we must attempt to amass a sufficiently large body of beliefs at each time-slice. Others may hold that we must attempt to amass the largest possible number of beliefs with a favorable truth-falsity ratio at some later point in time. Both versions of the received view, however, generate counterintuitive predictions about whether our actions are epistemically good. The second worry that this paper raises is the following. According to the received view, the beliefs we ought to aim at amassing are to be sufficiently many. But how many believed propositions are sufficiently many? It is typically argued that the believed propositions must be sufficiently many, for otherwise one could achieve the goal by believing only obviously true propositions. Then, it seems that for the believed propositions to be sufficiently many, they must at least be more than the obviously true propositions. But how many are the obviously true propositions? One might argue that, given that tautological propositions are obviously true, and that there are infinitely many tautologies, there are infinitely many obviously true propositions. Then, if sufficiently many propositions must be more than the obviously true propositions, one would never amass sufficiently many propositions. One way to respond to this worry is to restrict the beliefs that we ought to amass to beliefs about issues that are of interest or importance to us. Alston [2005] considers this view as a truism of epistemology. According to Alston, anyone can understand that this is obviously a truism, if one considers two alternatives. One consists in the life of an agent who withholds belief about any proposition. The other consists in the life of an agent whose beliefs are all or mostly false. In both cases, Alston argues, their lives would be surely worse from the lives of agents whose beliefs are mostly true; Therefore, he concludes that truth (and, in particular, truth about issues that are of interest or importance to us) is the primary epistemic good; that is, the primary goal of any agent's cognitive activities. However, this paper shows that the principles that Alston's remark implicitly relies upon are, if not wrong, at least contentious.

The second aim of this paper is to ask and give answer to the following question: 'Which is the function of belief?'; for an answer to this question allows to tell when belief appropriately serves its function, and, then, which is the goal of cognition. The thesis advanced is that the function of beliefs is to serve as premises for practical reasoning; and, as Williamson [2000; 2005], Hawthorne [2004] and Stanley [2005] have argued, this paper aims to argue a belief is an appropriate premise for one's practical reasoning if and only if it is knowledgeable. While this view is not new, the argument that this paper aims to develop is. More precisely, it starts from the idea that one must act as to maximize one's benefit; but that it is very hard to comply with this

norm, whereas it is relatively easier to act as to maximize one's expected benefit. For one can often determine through practical reasoning which actions' consequences seems the most beneficial to one. Importantly, given that beliefs serve as premises for practical reasoning, only if the relevant beliefs are accurate, the expected consequences are likely to be achieved, and they are actually the most beneficial. For this reason, a belief is an appropriate premise for one's practical reasoning only when it is true. Mere true belief is, however, less stable than knowledge (as Williamson [2000] argues) or typically promotes the formation of false beliefs, and the reliance on belief-forming methods that are likely to generate false beliefs. Therefore, it is preferable, all things considered, to rely only on knowledgeable beliefs in practical reasoning. In other words, beliefs appropriately serve their function only when they are knowledgeable. Therefore, knowledge is the goal of cognition.

This thesis is, then, defended against versions of the worries raised for the received view. Interestingly, it follows from the replies developed to these worries that the right reading of this view is a distributive reading; that is, the goal of cognition is not to maximize knowledge and minimize ignorance. There is no single goal of cognition; but, instead, as many goals as there are propositions: for each proposition *p*, one must believe *p* if and only if one knows *p*.

### *Rereferences*

- Alston, W. [1985]. 'Concepts of Epistemic Justification,' *The Monist* 68: 57–89.  
 Alston, W. [2005]. *Beyond 'Justification'*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.  
 David, M. [2001]. 'Truth as the Epistemic Goal,' in Steup, M. (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
 Foley, R. [1992]. 'Being Knowingly Incoherent,' *Noûs* 26: 181–203.  
 Hawthorne, J. [2004]. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Stanley, J. [2005]. *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Oxford: Clarendon.  
 Williamson, T. [2000]. *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
 Williamson, T. [2005]. 'Contextualism, Subject-Sensitive Invariantism, and Knowledge of Knowledge,' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55: 213–235.