

VERITISM AND THE GOAL OF INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT. Elgin has offered us a powerful articulation of an epistemology that does not, *contra* veritism, have a concern for truth at its core. I contend that the case for Elgin's alternative epistemological picture trades upon a faulty conception of what a veritistic epistemological outlook involves. In particular, I argue that the right conception of veritism—one that is fundamentally informed by the intellectual virtues—has none of the problematic consequences that Elgin claims. Relatedly, I maintain that we can account for the core role of objectual understanding in inquiry without thereby giving up on truth as the fundamental epistemic good (and even while granting that such understanding might well involve some false beliefs on the part of the subject).

KEYWORDS: Veritism; Epistemology; Epistemic Value; Elgin, Catherine; Understanding; Truth; Intellectual Virtue.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Catherine Elgin opens her magnificent book, *True Enough*, with the remark that “Philosophy valorizes truth.”¹ It is clear from the book as a whole that by ‘philosophy’ she really means epistemology, and it is the idea that epistemology should be so concerned with truth that is her chief target of criticism.² The challenge she poses for a truth-centred epistemology relates primarily to scientific practice, and in particular its widespread reliance on what Elgin terms ‘felicitous falsehoods’, such as idealisations that the scientist is fully aware are not strictly true but uses regardless. Elgin’s claim is that if well-conducted scientific inquiry makes essential use of such falsehoods, then truth cannot be the epistemic goal of science. If this claim is granted, then, since

well-conducted scientific inquiry is arguably an epistemically paradigmatic form of inquiry, it follows that truth ought not to play an overarching role in epistemology either.

I think that Elgin is mistaken in arguing for this conclusion. Elsewhere I have argued that we can make sense of how scientists make use of strictly false claims like idealisations without thereby having to endorse the kind of epistemological revisionism that Elgin advocates.³ Moreover, although I agree with Elgin that it is understanding rather than knowledge that is our primary concern in evaluating inquiries, including scientific inquiries, since I hold that understanding is (in the relevant sense) *factive* I don't take this to undermine the status of truth in this regard. I will be returning to these claims below, but first I want to focus on a different point. This is that I think a large part of the source of Elgin's dissatisfaction with truth-orientated epistemology is based on an impoverished conception of what such an epistemology must involve (albeit, admittedly, a conception that I think many epistemologists share). As we will see, once we jettison the impoverished conception with a more plausible understanding of what a truth-orientated epistemology would look like, then I think we can accommodate the kinds of considerations that Elgin raises without losing the fundamental role of truth in epistemology.

2. ELGIN *CONTRA* VERITISM

The name that Elgin gives for a truth-orientated epistemology is "veritism." (e.g., 1) As Elgin acknowledges, the terminology is Alvin Goldman's (e.g., 1999; 2002), and it is clear that she has essentially the same thing in mind as Goldman does when he uses this terminology.⁴ Here, for example, is Elgin explaining what veritism amounts to:

"According to veritism, truth-conduciveness is the appropriate standard of assessment for epistemic policies, practices, and their products. This holds for all epistemic achievements—knowledge, understanding, wisdom, know-how. The epistemic value of methods for obtaining and evaluating information, and the criteria used in such evaluations are purely instrumental. They are justified only because and only to the extent that they are truth-conducive." (9)

I don't think many epistemologists would balk at this characterisation of veritism. Notice that there are two key elements that make up the core veritist thesis. The first is that from a purely epistemological point of view truth is a fundamental—where this means non-instrumental—good.⁵ The second is that it is the *only* fundamental epistemic good, such that the value of all other epistemic goods are to be understood as non-fundamental—i.e., such that their goodness, from a purely epistemic point of view, is to be understood instrumentally in terms of their relation to the fundamental epistemic good of truth. So, for example, the epistemic goodness of epistemic

justification on this view is to be entirely understood in terms of how such an epistemic standing is truth-conducive. With these two features in mind, I have elsewhere characterised veritism as *epistemic value truth monism*.⁶ This is because it is essentially an axiological thesis about a certain kind of value (hence the ‘epistemic value’ part), where truth is not only a fundamental epistemic good (hence the ‘truth’ part) but also the *only* fundamental epistemic good (hence the ‘monism’ part). *Qua* epistemic value truth monism, veritism is thus opposed to conceptions of epistemic value that are either pluralistic or else also monistic but which don’t treat truth as the sole fundamental epistemic good (but rather knowledge, say).

Elgin clearly thinks that veritism is epistemological orthodoxy. As it happens, I think she is wrong about this, in that although I grant that it was once an epistemological orthodoxy, I don’t think it retains that status any more. Indeed, I would maintain that the tide has turned decisively against veritism in recent years (though, I would suggest, for all the wrong reasons). These days epistemological orthodoxy sides with the epistemic value pluralist, or at least with epistemic value monism of a different kind (such as an epistemic value *knowledge* monism). In any case, whether Elgin has orthodoxy on her side or against it doesn’t really matter for our purposes. What matters is rather that Elgin’s reasons for rejecting veritism are based on importing problematic, and non-essential, further theses into the view, albeit theses that most proponents of veritism would also endorse.⁷

We can bring out this point by considering how one might go about fleshing-out the axiological account of veritism just offered. In particular, how might we convert such an axiological thesis into practical advice that would guide such activities as how we epistemically evaluate beliefs? This is where proponents of veritism, including Goldman himself, make a key move, one that isn’t even explicitly remarked upon, which is to equate a desire for truth with a commitment to maximising true beliefs. This seems entirely natural, after all. If truth is the sole fundamental epistemic good, then we should surely, from a purely epistemic point of view, be seeking it out and so believing it.⁸ Accordingly, how else would one satisfy a desire for truth except by maximising one’s true beliefs? Notice too what is in the background here, but which is playing an important role in this reasoning, which is the idea that, given veritism, every truth, and thus every true belief, is equally good from an epistemic point of view. That is, we go from the idea that truth is the fundamental epistemic good, to the idea that all truths (and thus all true beliefs) are equally good from an epistemic point of view, to the idea that what we should seek from an epistemic point of view is to maximise true belief.⁹

There is a complication that we should highlight at this juncture, which is that once one starts to think of veritism in terms of the maximisation of true belief then one also needs to qualify the view in an important respect. After all, there may be ways of maximising one’s true beliefs

which also result in lots of error (a doxastic ‘scatter-gun’ approach, say), and clearly no-one who thinks that truth is the sole fundamental epistemic good is going to want to endorse a strategy of this kind, even if it does maximise one’s true beliefs. Accordingly, the maximisation claim has to be understood relative to some further constraint about avoiding error (false belief), and depending on how this is done this will impose limits on this maximisation strategy. Let’s go with how Elgin (10) understands this constraint, which is that veritism holds that one should never believe a known (‘acknowledged’) falsehood, even if that would lead to further true beliefs further down the line.

Notice, however, that this additional constraint doesn’t materially change the view under consideration. Although we now have the goal of maximising true belief operating under the constraint that one never believes a known falsehood, this doesn’t mean that there are two fundamental epistemic goods in play, one concerned with truth and another with the avoidance of error, as the latter is clearly derivative on the former. That is, we care about avoiding error *because* we care about truth; it is not an independent epistemic value. So veritism, even under this construal, is still a form of epistemic truth monism. Moreover, in the most straightforward cases maximising one’s true belief will lead to the avoidance of belief in known falsehoods by default. Ordinarily, after all, believing known falsehoods will be contrary to one maximising one’s true beliefs. So even if veritists are not committed to the idea that one should *without exception* maximise one’s true beliefs, they are generally committed to this strategy. In short, the idea is that the concern for truth that is core to veritism is converted into a desire for true beliefs (which are all equally good by veritist lights), and hence results (*modulo* the constraint about avoiding belief in known falsehoods) in the goal of maximising the number of one’s true beliefs. This is why, for example, we are meant to measure the epistemic goodness of a belief-forming process by working out how successful it is at generating true beliefs. Accordingly, if process A is shown to generate more true beliefs than process B, then (*modulo* the constraint about avoiding belief in known falsehoods) it follows that it must be of greater epistemic value.

There are thus two claims that are incorporated into veritism as it is normally understood. The first is that all truths, and thus all true beliefs, are of equal epistemic value. The second idea, which I take to be a natural consequence of this first claim, is that we should maximise true beliefs, at least taking into account the need to avoid belief in known falsehoods. Veritism is thus thought to lead to a kind of maximising epistemic consequentialism, where the unit of assessment to be maximised is that of true belief.¹⁰ Call the thesis that the general veritism thesis should be understood such that it has these consequences *veritism**. The interesting question thus becomes whether one can distinguish between veritism and *veritism**, or whether they amount to the same thing (as most veritists suppose). Since the first additional claim that makes up *veritism** naturally

leads to the second, and since it can also be expressed without worrying about the qualification about belief in known falsehoods (which means that we can effectively bracket this concern in what follows), it will be useful to focus our attention on this claim (while keeping in mind that the two claims are often run together, as we will see).

Interestingly, Elgin adverts to what we are calling veritism*, and the fact that most veritists would endorse it, early on when she is outlining what veritism involves. She writes that “veritists hold that our overriding cognitive objective is to believe as many truths as possible” (10), crediting such a position to Williams James, William Alston, Goldman, Keith Lehrer, and Laurence Bonjour. If Elgin were right that veritism collapses into veritism* (as I grant even most veritists would suppose), then I think she would also be correct in thinking that the proposal could not accommodate good scientific practice. We get a flavour of the argument that is in the offing in this regard in this passage:

“[*Veritism*] does not discriminate among true [...] beliefs. Insofar as our goals are purely cognitive, it says, we should amass as many truths [...] as possible. This is easily done. Take any number. Add two. Do it again. And again. And again. With each iteration you get another truth. Your risk of accepting a falsehood along the way is vanishingly small. Should you prefer to restrict yourself to the empirical realm, take any trivial truth, such as ‘Cats don’t grow on trees’. Add a disjunct. (Its truth-value doesn’t matter.) Add another disjunct. And another. You now have numerous true beliefs. This is far easier and far less risky than, for example, mounting a carefully controlled, scrupulously executed, theoretically grounded experiment. Nevertheless, running the experiment is epistemically more valuable.” (10)

Notice that Elgin here draws on both of the additional claims that make up veritism*. She opens with the claim that all true beliefs are equally good (in that the view ‘does not discriminate among true [...] beliefs’), and quickly extracts the consequence that ‘we should amass as many truths [...] as possible.’ Accordingly, it doesn’t matter that there are clearly trivial ways, as Elgin describes, of maximising true beliefs. These are to be preferred, given veritism*, even over good scientific inquiry, given that we know in advance that the latter is not going to generate true beliefs to the same extent. But that’s crazy. As we noted above, scientific inquiry ought to be a guide as to the epistemic good, given that it a paradigmatic epistemic process. Accordingly, if veritism leads to veritism*, and thereby comes into conflict with scientific inquiry in this way, then it has to go.¹¹

Given how Elgin has set things up, it thus seems that veritism, and with it the idea of truth as central to epistemology, is in jeopardy. Indeed, we don’t even need to consider the details of Elgin’s position—e.g., the examples that she offers of good scientific reasoning involving felicitous falsehoods, the claims about objectual understanding being at the heart of scientific inquiry but also non-factive, and so on—since we can see how problematic veritism is right from the off. The nub of the matter is that veritism entails veritism*.¹²

3. VERITISM WITHOUT VERITISM*

I want to claim that veritism can resist Elgin's critique, and thereby accommodate the scientific practices that she describes. The problem, I claim, is not veritism itself, but rather concerns how veritism is thought to lead to veritism*.¹³

We can see why this commitment is problematic by imagining an inquirer who is guided by nothing more than a love for the truth. Such a person ought to be veritism embodied. If veritism* were indeed a consequence of veritism, however, then that love for the truth could manifest itself in a preference for the easy cognitive life of accumulating as many pointless truths as possible rather than (for example) the difficult cognitive task of engaging in fundamental scientific inquiry, such as regarding the ultimate composition of the universe. But that doesn't look like a love for the truth at all, so what has gone wrong?

Indeed, this way of putting the matter exposes a dialectical awkwardness in Elgin's manner of rejecting veritism that we should comment on. At its heart, veritism is just the idea that truth is the fundamental epistemic good and hence that we should, as Elgin puts it, 'valorise truth'. And yet her critique of veritism appeals to how a well-conducted scientific inquiry could be in conflict with what veritism demands—in particular, that it entails (what we are calling) veritism*—leading her to conclude that veritism has to go. In short, well-conducted scientific inquiry doesn't valorise truth, and hence neither should we. But what is puzzling about this dialectical set-up is that we would surely antecedently imagine that a well-conducted scientific inquiry would be the optimal manifestation of what it is to 'valorise truth', and thus of veritism. Accordingly, before we follow Elgin in rejecting veritism, it is surely incumbent upon us to wonder whether it is not veritism that has to go, but rather Elgin's understanding of it, and in particular whether the core veritist idea that we should fundamentally value the truth should be unpacked in a way that leads to (the clearly problematic) veritism*. Moreover, given how Elgin has herself characterised this debate as being about the core veritist idea of whether we should fundamentally value the truth, this is not a merely verbal dispute over how best to characterise veritism. If we can differentiate veritism from veritism*, and thereby rescue the former from the fatal problems associated with the latter, then it seems that we can embrace the idea that we should fundamentally value the truth after all.

So how do we go about differentiating veritism from veritism*? What's key here is the way that the transition from the former to the latter involves equating a love for the truth with the idea that all truths should be valued equally. As we noted above, it is only if the former entails the latter that we get our puzzle, since it is only then that we are required to value, from an epistemic point of view, insignificant truths the same as weighty, significant truths. Moreover, it is only with this entailment in play that we get the further idea that from an epistemic point of view we should

maximise true beliefs no matter how insignificant they might be (so long, of course, that we don't end up believing known falsehoods anyway). But how secure is this entailment? Moreover, notice that the spirit of veritism only directly licences the former claim, in the sense that from a purely epistemological point of view it is ultimately the truth, and only the truth, that we should care about. So if we can resist this entailment, then we can avoid saddling veritism with the further commitment to veritism* that is evidently problematic. And clearly we should resist such an entailment if tying that commitment to veritism leads to such odd results.

I think that a large part of the attraction to treating veritism as committed to veritism* is that without this further claim it is simply hard to assess claims about truth-conduciveness. If we are not counting true beliefs in this regard, then what are we meant to be counting? But rather than take a simple-minded route in this regard that clearly generates the wrong result, we should instead be willing to embrace the complexity of 'weighing' truth. For example, if counting true beliefs is all that matters, then a true belief in a conjunction ought to be on a par with a true belief in one of the conjuncts of that conjunction, but clearly one potentially gets a better handle on the truth with the former belief rather than the latter belief. Moreover, it's not as if the solution is to focus on the logical structure of propositions either, such that a true belief in a conjunction is worth 'double' a true belief in one of the conjuncts. Conjunctions can contain trivial conjuncts, after all, of a kind that give us no purchase on the nature of things at all, while a 'simple' proposition might nonetheless afford us great insight in this regard.

The point is that in caring about the truth we care about getting things right, including, most importantly, the extent to which we have cognitive contact with reality.¹⁴ There simply is no piecemeal—or 'granular', to use an expression that Elgin employs (e.g., 13)—way of measuring this kind of thing. A true statement of fundamental science may be expressed as a single proposition, but it offers us a great deal by way of cognitive contact with reality. In contrast a long list of trivial empirical claims might offer us hardly any cognitive contact with reality at all. In the sense that matters to us, there is more truth in the former than in the latter, even if the latter involves more true propositions. If we care about the truth, as veritism demands, then we should prefer the former over the latter. But that means that caring about the truth does not mean caring about all truths equally. Veritism should be kept apart from veritism*.

If there is no straightforward measure of epistemic value, then how are we to go about being veritists? I think the answer to this question lies in turning the whole enterprise on its head such that claims about epistemic value undergo a 'virtue-turn' whereby questions about intellectual virtue become primary. That is, rather than understanding the intellectual virtues in terms of whether they lead to some independently determined fundamental epistemic good, we should instead understand what it means to generate this fundamental epistemic good by reflecting on the

nature of the intellectual virtues. In particular, we should understand how to achieve the epistemic good of truth via appeal to what an intellectually virtuous inquiry would involve.

I am here thinking of the intellectual virtues along broadly neo-Aristotelian lines, as prominently defended by Linda Zagzebski (e.g., 1996), amongst others.¹⁵ One aspect of this account of the intellectual virtues that is key for our purposes is that they are characterised in part by being associated with a distinctive motivational state—a desire for the truth. This is one way in which the intellectual virtues, while being skill-like cognitive traits, are not to be understood as merely cognitive skills. Take a paradigm intellectual virtue like (intellectual) conscientiousness, where one is suitably attentive to evidential considerations in terms of what one believes, asserts, accepts, and so forth. To manifest this intellectual virtue it is not enough that one merely reliably delivers the right result in this regard. Rather, it is important in addition that this reliable disposition is rooted in the right motivational states.

This contrast between mere cognitive skills and intellectual virtues is also reflected in other ways. For example, the intellectual virtues are acquired and maintained in a distinctive manner. One could gain a cognitive skill entirely unreflectively; indeed, some cognitive skills—one’s cognitive faculties—are innate (in the sense that they will develop naturally as one cognitively matures). Intellectual virtues cannot be acquired in this way. They are instead acquired via conscious emulation of intellectually virtuous exemplars around one. One has to train oneself to be intellectually virtuous. Moreover, while a cognitive skill, once acquired, might be retained thereafter without any additional endeavour on one’s part, the intellectual virtues require regular maintenance or else they are lost. The contrast between the intellectual virtues and mere cognitive skills is also reflected in the special axiological status of the former. In particular, the intellectual virtues are held to be constitutive parts of a life of flourishing, *eudaimonia*. As such, they have a final, non-instrumental, value that is normally lacking from mere cognitive skills. Relatedly, they are properly valued by the virtuous subject differently. There may be good reasons not to maintain a particular cognitive skill (e.g., if it is no longer of any practical use), but one would be making a fundamental error if one deliberately allowed one’s intellectual virtues to degrade.

Given that the intellectual virtues involve a desire for the truth, they naturally go hand-in-hand with veritism. We might think that the explanatory direction-of-fit in this regard should be that we understand the intellectual virtues in terms of a prior conception of veritism. But I think the foregoing makes clear that the way we are inclined to unpack this notion, in terms of a commitment to veritism*, is problematic. In contrast, however, I think we have a very clear grip on what the manifestation of the intellectual virtues involves. Accordingly, it is open to us to characterise veritism in terms of the intellectual virtues rather than *vice versa*. In particular, we have a prior grip on what an intellectually virtuous inquiry involves. We recognise that intellectually

virtuous inquiry sets a premium on important truths, such as those truths that represent a substantive form of cognitive contact with reality, as opposed to merely focussing on an accumulation of true beliefs regardless of the cognitive purchase on reality that they offer. Moreover, we also recognise that intellectually virtuous inquiry does this precisely *because* it is aimed at the goal of truth, as opposed to this being because of extra-epistemic factors or because there is some other epistemic good in play.

In effect, then, I am trying to turn Elgin's criticism of veritism on its head. She wants to appeal to a paradigmatic kind of scientific inquiry in order to show that veritism, and with it a conception epistemology that valorises truth, is problematic. But I rather think that we should argue in the opposite direction. That is, once we understand what a good, in the sense of intellectually virtuous, inquiry looks like, then we come to see what it actually means to valorise truth. As a result, we are led not to the rejection of veritism, but rather to the defence of it. And we are able to do this precisely because by understanding what veritism involves in terms of the intellectual virtues we are not led to understanding this view as being committed to veritism*.

Notice that it is not important to this claim whether scientific inquiries actually do involve the manifestation of intellectual virtue (indeed, clearly many of them do not). In fact, although I suspect that paradigmatically good scientific inquiry would also be intellectually virtuous inquiry, we do not even need this thesis in place for our purposes here. (Incidentally, presumably Elgin would also endorse something like this thesis, since it is only if paradigmatic scientific inquiry is in some robust way representative of good epistemic norms that we can conclude anything about the status of a thesis like veritism by appealing to instances of it as Elgin does). The point is rather that when a scientist directs her inquiry at uncovering deep and important scientific truths, as opposed to trying to maximise her true beliefs by believing as many trivial truths as possible, she is not thereby acting contrary to what veritism would demand. Instead, she is doing exactly what an intellectually virtuous subject who is motivated by a love of the truth would do, and hence is acting entirely in accordance with veritism. Accordingly, regardless of whether our scientist is in fact manifesting the intellectual virtues, the point remains that the existence of such scientific behaviour in no way undermines the case for veritism, at least so long as veritism is understood in terms of the intellectual virtues, and hence in such a fashion that it does not entail veritism*.

4. INQUIRY AND UNDERSTANDING

This brings us to a point on which I entirely agree with Elgin, which is that good inquiries are aimed at generating understanding rather than knowledge. As Elgin rightly notes, in virtue of being

concerned with a specific proposition, knowledge tends to be granular. In contrast, understanding—at least the kind of *objectual* understanding that Elgin focusses on at any rate, as when one understands a “topic, discipline, or subject matter” (43)—is holistic in nature. Such understanding is not just knowledge of particular relevant facts. It rather involves a richly integrated and unified set of beliefs regarding the subject matter in question.

In saying that good inquiries aim at understanding rather than knowledge, Elgin is making the point that the scientist, for example, is not simply trying to notch up new items of knowledge in a piecemeal fashion, but is rather aiming at an understanding of the subject matter about which they are inquiring. Since understanding admits of degrees, this can also include seeking a *richer* understanding of that subject matter, where a rudimentary understanding of it is already in hand. Piecemeal knowledge may be useful in this regard, but the ultimate goal is understanding rather than merely the accumulation of such knowledge.

I entirely agree with Elgin that good inquiry—which I would characterise as intellectually virtuous inquiry—is geared towards the acquisition of understanding rather than knowledge. Where we differ is that I see this point as falling out of veritism—at least when this thesis is understood via the intellectual virtues as explained above—rather than representing a departure from it. In particular, I would claim that if one is guided by a love for the truth, then one will seek to gain an understanding of the world around one, as opposed to merely wanting to know particular facts about it.

Now one might be puzzled by this. If veritism is geared towards promoting truth as the fundamental epistemic good, then how come the goal of inquiry is understanding rather than truth? But this is a false dichotomy. One seeks understanding precisely *because* one desires the truth. That is to say, in desiring the truth, one seeks to understand it. There need be no tension here that would prompt us to make a choice between truth or understanding as the goals of inquiry.¹⁶

When Elgin claims that good inquiry is aimed at understanding, however, she has in mind something that *conflicts* with veritism. This is because she thinks that objectual understanding, while it must be “grounded in fact” (44), should be understood as non-factive, and hence that the veritist cannot accept that it is the goal of an epistemically good inquiry. But Elgin is mistaken about this.

For one thing, given the holistic nature of objectual understanding, and given also that such understanding comes in degrees, there is nothing a veritist need object to in holding that one can have objectual understanding of a subject matter even while having some false beliefs about it. It’s compatible with my understanding a subject matter like quantum physics that I have some false beliefs about it, just so long as they are peripheral to the subject matter rather than

fundamental. In such a case one has an imperfect understanding, one that can be improved upon by, for example, correcting some of the false beliefs that one holds in this regard. Nonetheless, one has crossed the relevant threshold for having genuine understanding so long as one's other beliefs that make up that integrated cluster are indeed true (such that the understanding is 'grounded in fact', as Elgin also demands).¹⁷

But the kinds of cases that Elgin is interested in don't concern the agent in question having false beliefs anyway. Take the case of idealisations, such as Elgin's favourite example of the ideal gas law (e.g., 14). The point is that scientists employing such an idealisation are fully aware that this is what it is, and hence no false beliefs are issued in using it. (Indeed, if they didn't realise this, then we might well doubt that they really understood the subject matter in play. But in that case the example no longer serves Elgin's purposes anyway). There is not even an acceptance of a falsehood in play, as everything the scientist accepts for the purpose of using the ideal gas law—such as that it is a useful tool to understand actual gases—is entirely true. The same goes for the other types of cases involving felicitous falsehoods that Elgin focusses on, since what they all share is that the practicing scientist will be fully aware of their role and hence not tempted to form false beliefs as a consequence. It follows that the understanding that they propagate is not in tension with veritism.

Elgin glosses over this last point by writing as if veritism would preclude a subject making any kind of use of a false proposition in inquiry, including one that involved recognising its falsehood. Here, for example, is how Elgin puts the matter at one point:

“The more serious problem [*with veritism*] comes with the laws, models, and idealizations that are acknowledged not to be true but that are nonetheless critical to, indeed at least partially constitutive of, the understanding that science delivers.” (14)

But these felicitous falsehoods are only 'critical to' scientific understanding to the extent that they are usefully employed in gaining that scientific understanding *qua useful falsehoods*. That means that there is no conflict with veritism here, at least where that thesis is properly understood. In particular, provided we ally veritism with the intellectual virtues then we would expect a virtuous inquiry to make use of such helpful idealisations if they enable the subject to gain greater cognitive contact with reality. Since the subject is aware of their literal falsity and only employs them in pursuit of the truth, there is nothing in the use of them which would be in conflict with our virtuous inquirer's love of the truth.¹⁸

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that we can accept many of the key claims that Elgin makes without thereby embracing the wholesale revisionism that she proposes. The key point is to recognise that she is working with an impoverished conception of veritism, one that is committed to a further thesis, veritism*, that is clearly highly dubious. Once we separate out what is core to veritism, and set that thesis within the intellectual virtues, then we see that we can embrace many of the points that Elgin makes without thereby giving up on truth as the fundamental epistemic good. Moreover, we can accept that objectual understanding is the goal of an intellectually virtuous inquiry, and also that objectual understanding is compatible with the subject having some false beliefs in this regard, while nonetheless retaining a commitment to veritism. *Contra* Elgin, philosophers, *qua* epistemologists anyway, are entirely right to valorise truth.

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NOTES

- ¹ Elgin (2017, 1). Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to this work.
- ² This idea is a *motif* in Elgin's work. See also, for example, Elgin (1996; 2004; 2009).
- ³ See Pritchard (2007; 2009; 2014*a*) and Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 4).
- ⁴ See also Goldman & Olsson (2009) and my remarks in endnote 13.
- ⁵ Note that it obviously doesn't follow from this claim that veritism is committing to holding that truth is non-instrumentally valuable *simpliciter*.
- ⁶ See Pritchard (2011; 2014*b*; 2016*a*; 2016*c*).
- ⁷ Indeed, I think the mistake that Elgin is making in this regard can also be found in the work of other contemporary epistemologists who have rejected epistemic value truth monism in favour of competing conceptions of epistemic value, though I will be setting this wider point aside here. For my defence of epistemic value truth monism, see Pritchard (2014*b*; 2016*a*; *forthcoming*). See also Pritchard (2011; 2016*c*).
- ⁸ Or at least endorsing it in some way, where this might not be best captured by the propositional attitude of belief, but perhaps by some other propositional attitude like acceptance. In what follows I will set this complication to one side.
- ⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Synthese* for encouraging me to unpack the reasoning in play here, and thereby highlight the intermediate step in this reasoning.
- ¹⁰ For a helpful recent overview of the literature on epistemic consequentialism, see Dunn (2019).
- ¹¹ Notice too that supplementing veritism with the idea that we should only care about 'interesting' truths is not going to work. Either the notion of an interesting truth is understood as some further epistemic good, independent of truth, in which case one is not then defending veritism, but rather advancing a form of epistemic value pluralism instead. Or else the notion of an interesting truth is understood along non-epistemic lines, such as in terms of practical value. But then one has not resolved the problem in hand, since it would remain the case that from a purely epistemic point of view a large but trivial set of beliefs can be preferable to a smaller, but more significant, set of beliefs.
- ¹² Elsewhere I have argued that the problem that Elgin identifies for veritism is part of a cluster of related difficulties. For example, another prominent difficulty facing this proposal is the 'swamping' problem. For some key recent articulations of this problem, see Kvanvig (2003; 2010) and Zagzebski (2003). For my defence of veritism in this regard, see Pritchard (2011; 2014*b*; 2016*a*; 2016*c*).
- ¹³ Interestingly, in a recent paper that responds to some similar problems facing veritism (though with a specific focus on how this view plays out with regard to epistemic justification) posed by Berker (2013), Goldman (2015, §5) makes the curious move of arguing that he regards the projects of offering an account of epistemic value and of understanding epistemic justification as entirely orthogonal to one another, such that one can be a veritist about the former without this having any ramifications for the latter. As I hope my comments here make clear, I think this is a mistake, in that Goldman would be better off rethinking how he understands veritism (i.e., so that it doesn't entail veritism*). See also the exchange between Pritchard (2016*c*) and Goldman (2016), where my attempts to rescue his veritism from the so-called 'swamping problem' are resolutely spurned.
- ¹⁴ This way of putting the matter is, I believe, originally due to Zagzebski (e.g., 1996, *passim*; 1999).
- ¹⁵ For a useful recent overview of work the intellectual virtues, see Battaly (2014).
- ¹⁶ A related confusion that is common in epistemology is to think that whatever epistemic standing would properly close a well-conducted inquiry must thereby be the goal of a well-conducted inquiry. (So, for example, if only knowledge would close a well-conducted inquiry, then well-conducted inquiry must aim at knowledge, rather than, say, truth). For discussion, see Pritchard (2016*b*; cf. Pritchard 2014*b*; 2016*a*).
- ¹⁷ One difference between Elgin and myself concerns how we treat the relationship between objectual understanding and a narrower form of understanding that is sometimes called propositional understanding—roughly, an understanding of why something quite specific is the case (e.g., why such-and-such happened). Elgin (43-44) clearly thinks that objectual understanding is the primary notion in play here, such that we can only understand propositional understanding in relation to it. In contrast, I tend to think that propositional understanding is the more basic notion, in that objectual understanding is what results when one has an integrated body of propositional understanding. See, for example, Pritchard (2009; 2014*a*) and Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 4).
- ¹⁸ For more on how scientific understanding can employ idealisations without thereby being committed to falsehoods, see Sorensen's (2012) insightful discussion, *contra* Elgin (2004), of how scientific idealisations function as suppositions.