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TRUTH AS A FUNDAMENTAL VALUE

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ABSTRACT. What does it mean for truth to be a fundamental value? I outline a way of unpacking this idea that doesn't collapse under the weight of implausible implications, including the following: that one should value all truths equally (i.e., no matter how trivial that truth might be); that one should prefer truth to knowledge or understanding; that the value of truth should trump all other considerations (including practical, ethical, aesthetic, and so on); and that there cannot be truths that one is unable accept or otherwise fully embrace. The discussion proceeds by way of reflections on, *inter alia*, Nietzsche's claim that the truth is terrible and Wittgenstein's contention that all rational evaluation presupposes an overarching groundless certainty.

1. Nietzsche famously argued that the 'truth is terrible'.¹ He is not alone amongst philosophers in thinking this, of course, but he perhaps went much further than most in articulating just how terrible he thought the truth was.² Nietzsche draws an intriguing consequence from this claim, which is that the unpalatable nature of these terrible truths means that we simply cannot accept them. The most obvious case of this are truths about human suffering and one's inevitable death, followed by, eventually, one's complete oblivion (since nothing any of us will ever do will be remembered for long). These are truths that we are hardly ever—perhaps never—able to face head-on, much less consistently embrace in our lives, as to do so would lead to a kind of practical paralysis. We need to

somehow forget about these truths in order to get on with living our lives, as once they become part of the foreground of our thinking then they drown out all else. It is thus fortunate that, for most of us at least, we seem psychologically constituted such that we only ever really contemplate these truths briefly, in a kind of ‘side-on’ fashion (whereby one squints at them before setting them to one side, rather than staring at them in full light).

Nietzsche would further argue, of course, that our suffering and eventual demise, along with the projects that we devote ourselves to in our lives and which help to put this suffering and demise to the back of our minds (albeit temporarily), are completely without purpose and thus meaning. We might be able to embrace the suffering and ultimate oblivion that is essential to our human condition if we at least had the comfort of knowing that our lives served some wider objective, but Nietzsche maintains that there is nothing that fits the bill. (That’s not to say that he thought life wasn’t worth living, of course—he seems to hold that there can be aesthetic goods that play a positive role in this regard—but just that whatever makes it worth living lacks transcendental purpose). The existential situation is thus truly bleak. No wonder then that we instinctively avoid the terrible truths concerning it.

Nietzsche further argues that our inability to reckon with the truth about the hopeless nature of our predicament entails that truth cannot coherently be a fundamental value at all. Those who maintain that it is a value are, he suggests, simply self-deceived, with their actual values being completely different and operating in disguise, for if truth really were a fundamental value then one would embrace the terrible truths that he outlines, and of course no-one (or hardly anyone at any rate) does that. The same goes for those who treat factive epistemic standings like knowledge as a fundamental value. Here Nietzsche doesn’t just claim that one is self-deceived in claiming to be aiming at this lofty goal, but moreover maintains that we don’t have such knowledge anyway, for what we think we know about the world is illusory.

My concern here is not with Nietzsche exegesis. Moreover, I don’t believe that the truth is terrible in quite the respects that Nietzsche supposes anyway. For example, I don’t think our lives are meaningless, the projects that we engage in are without purpose, and so on. Nonetheless, it is surely right that some truths are terrible in the Nietzschean sense that we have articulated, in that, for most of us (probably all of us), we are so constituted that we simply cannot endorse them. Even so, I want to argue that the existence of such terrible truths does not entail, as Nietzsche thought, that truth cannot be a fundamental value. The challenge is thus to offer a credible understanding of

what it would mean for truth to be a fundamental value that can accommodate the existence of these terrible truths that one cannot endorse.

2. Let's start by considering what is meant by the idea that one cannot embrace these terrible truths about human existence. Notice that this doesn't mean that one is unable to believe them, as I take it that we do believe them, at least in a broad folk sense of belief. Indeed, we not only believe them, but know them. We are perfectly aware that we will die, that most of human life ends in terrible suffering, that such suffering is often unjust (good people suffer just like the wicked), and so on. The issue is not that we are unaware of these truths, but rather that there is a sense in which they are disconnected from our actions. In particular, if we really did take on board what these truths amounted to, then we would surely live our lives differently. That is, for the most part we live our lives as if we don't believe these things even though in some sense we do. We act as if we might well live forever and don't reflect at all on our eventual demise and the terrible suffering that will likely precede it. The issue then is not so much that we are psychologically compelled not to believe these truths about the human condition, as they are so commonplace that we can't help but be aware of them, but rather that psychological processes ensure that, for most of us anyway, they are suitably compartmentalized from everyday life such that they don't interfere with our ordinary activities and projects. The core class of terrible truths are thus truths that, for psychological reasons, are only believed in this compartmentalized way.

Interestingly, there do seem to be truths that one cannot believe at all, where the 'cannot' here is more than just psychological. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that free will is illusory (something that Nietzsche maintained, as it happens). Could one come to believe this truth? The problem, of course, is that the very notion of belief seems inapplicable to subjects who lack free will, as forming beliefs is arguably something only free agents can do. At the very least, the idea that one could consider the matter and come to the conclusion that one lacks free will, thereby forming one's belief on that basis, seems ridiculous. To conceive of oneself as someone who is even considering the free will problem thus seems to require one to treat oneself as genuinely free. Of course, none of this tells us anything about whether we are free, but only that we seem compelled to think that we are regardless of whether it is true.

It could be that one's lack of free will is also a terrible existential truth. Lacking free will would seem to make one's life absurd, after all, as our choices and life projects would all now be rendered ridiculous. But notice that even if this is a terrible truth in this sense, our inability to believe

that we lack free will isn't like our inability to embrace existential truths about human suffering and death. Rather than this inability reflecting a merely psychological difficulty, the issue is instead conceptual. While one can, in a broad sense at least, believe the terrible existential truths (albeit only in a compartmentalized way), one cannot believe at all that one lacks free will. We thus have a second category of truths that one cannot embrace, in this case because they can't be coherently believed to be true.

There is a crucial difference between the terrible truths about the human condition and the truths at issue in the free will debate, however. For while the former are widely accepted as true—albeit only in a compartmentalized way, as just noted—the latter is under dispute. That is, while one could not coherently believe that one lacks free will if it were true, for all we know it might not be true. If in actuality it isn't true (i.e., if we do have free will), however, then there isn't a terrible truth about our lack of freedom that we are unable to believe. Still, the point remains that there is a sense in which we are committed to regarding ourselves as free regardless of whether it is true, and that seems to pose a challenge to the idea of truth as a fundamental value just as much as there being terrible truths about the human condition that we cannot fully accept. Insofar as we do believe such a claim, it doesn't seem to be because it is true (which it might not be), but rather because we are incapable in this respect of believing otherwise.

This second class of terrible truths extends beyond the thesis that we lack free will. Consider, for example, the radical sceptical claim that nothing, or at least hardly anything, can be known. One reason why radical scepticism is rarely presented as a position, as opposed to a puzzle or a paradox, is that it is hard to make sense of how it could be coherently presented as a dialectical stance. If one genuinely doubts everything, then how is one even to make sense of the radical sceptical doubt? As Wittgenstein (1969, §613) puts it, when we consider extreme doubt of this kind, it 'would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.' For example, if one is not certain of anything, then how can one even be sure what the content of one's radical doubt is? Here, again, is Wittgenstein:

“If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.” (Wittgenstein 1969, §§114-15)

There is thus a deep incoherence in the idea of believing that radical scepticism is true. As with the problem of free will, this observation tells us nothing about whether radical scepticism is true, but only whether we are capable of believing it. Moreover, just as with the problem of free will, the inability to believe this claim is not merely a psychological limitation, but rather reflects the

incoherence of radical scepticism as a position. As with the claim that we lack free will, the thesis that radical scepticism is true would likely have existential import, as it would arguably make our lives absurd. But it is still different from Nietzsche's terrible truths, as the problem is not merely that we would psychologically struggle to fully embrace this truth (if it is a truth), but rather that there is something inherently suspect about the idea that one could believe such a thing in the first place.

3. The point I am getting at is that if the existence of terrible truths that we can only loosely believe in a compartmentalized way reveals that there is something amiss with the idea of truth as a fundamental value, then this problem should be even worse once we reflect that there could be truths that we are simply incapable of believing (and not just from a purely psychological point of view). Surely this must mean that there are some inherent limitations to the idea that truth can be a fundamental value?

I think it is worth spelling out the Wittgensteinian line on radical scepticism in a bit more detail to highlight just what such a limitation might amount to in practice. For Wittgenstein, the claim is not merely that we should be committed to thinking that radical scepticism is false, but that we inevitably have an all-out visceral certainty that this is so, a certainty that is on vivid display in our actions. Wittgenstein further contends that this certainty cannot be rationally grounded, as it is a certainty that needs to be in place in order for one to participate in the logical space of reasons. This is what makes it a 'hinge' certainty, in that for the 'door' of rational evaluation to turn, this hinge certainty must stay put.³ Our practices of offering reasons for and against particular claims thus already presuppose this backdrop of primitive certainty, which is why such rational processes cannot be extended to apply to the hinge certainty itself. We can become aware of the role that this arational certainty plays, but that is all.⁴

Wittgenstein further claims that our hinge certainty doesn't merely concern the general idea that we are not radically mistaken, but rather manifests itself—indeed, primarily manifests itself—in very specific commitments that we have in ordinary conditions. This is where Wittgenstein turns his attention to the 'Moorean commonsense' claims, such as that one has two hands, that one is speaking English, that one's name is such-and-such, and so on. Wittgenstein claims that the certainty we have as regards these claims in ordinary circumstances is itself a manifestation of the general hinge certainty. Accordingly, this means that these fundamental nodes of commonsense are also arational hinge certainties too. Think about that for a moment. That which one is most certain of in normal conditions, such as what one's name is or whether one has hands, is not something that one

can ever have reason to think is true, since it is part of the fabric of certainty against which rational evaluation occurs.

This is a startling claim, and of course one might object to it. As it happens, I think Wittgenstein is right about this, and I have defended this claim in detail elsewhere, but for our purposes that isn't all that important.⁵ What's instead significant is that it is a possible philosophical position regarding the nature of our commitments, one that would extend the class of potential truths that one simply could never believe from the broadly theoretical concerns (albeit theoretical realms that have existential import, as we've noted) about free will and radical scepticism to ordinary life itself. Just as one cannot coherently believe that radical scepticism is true, so one cannot coherently believe in normal conditions that one does not have hands either, and much else besides. We can become aware of these specific hinge commitments and the distinctive role that they play in our practices (just as we can become aware of the overarching hinge certainty that one is not radically mistaken), but to be aware of them as such is thereby to recognize, in a way that one wouldn't ordinarily recognize in everyday life, that one's commitment to them is essentially groundless.

While we can loosely call our hinge commitments beliefs (i.e., in the broad folk sense of belief), they are very different from beliefs in the sense that is of most interest to epistemologists—*viz.*, that propositional attitude that is a constituent part of knowledge. Call this latter notion *K-apt belief*, to distinguish it from the broader, folk conception of belief. Our hinge commitments are not *K-apt* beliefs, as they are not, *qua* arational commitments, in the market for knowledge.⁶ Our commitment to them is not a result of rational processes, nor is it responsive in the usual ways to rational processes—e.g., discovering that one has no rational basis for thinking that one has hands will not lead to one being any less certain, in normal conditions, that one has hands. One can say that one doubts that one has hands, just as one can say that one doubts that one knows anything at all or that one has free will, but one's actions will reveal one's basic certainty in these propositions. The doubt is thus in an important sense fake (even if one is being sincere saying that one doubts it).

I don't think this should surprise us. If we can't believe, even in the broad folk sense of belief (but certainty in the *K-apt* sense), that our beliefs as a whole are radically mistaken because we are so constituted as to be absolutely certain of the opposite, then how can one have a *K-apt* belief that one is not radically mistaken? Similarly, if by parity of reasoning one cannot believe the denial of a specific hinge commitment in normal conditions, then it follows that one cannot *K-apt* believe this hinge either. Although we don't need the hinge framework to make sense of our inability to believe

that we lack free will (we didn't appeal to it earlier, for example), one could make such an appeal here. To be wrong about whether one has free will, after all, would amount to having a worldview that is radically in error. No wonder then that one cannot believe that one lacks free will. But it would also follow that one cannot have a K-apt belief that one has free will.

As previously noted, my interest is not to persuade the reader of these Wittgensteinian claims, but to show what bearing they have on the idea of truth as a fundamental value. For on this picture there is now a sense in which one's body of commitments is in basic respects not truth-directed at all, for it consists, in part, of a primitive certainty that would remain in place regardless of whether it is true.⁷

4. It would seem then that if the terrible truths that Nietzsche describes are grounds to be sceptical of the idea of truth as a fundamental value, then the Wittgensteinian picture of the structure of reasons, with arational certainties at its heart, should offer even more grounds for scepticism. I want to suggest, however, that even someone who accepts the Wittgensteinian picture that we have sketched can nonetheless subscribe to truth as a fundamental value. So let us now consider how this axiological claim should be understood.

Let's start with fundamental value itself. I take it this means that the value is final, rather than merely instrumental. That is, to treat truth as a fundamental value is to regard it as something that is valuable independently of any instrumental good it might serve—one values, as it were, truth for its own sake, and not just for the sake of something else (such as its utility). Obviously, the truth often is very useful, and in making the claim that it has final value one is not denying this fact. The point is rather that the value of the truth isn't just a matter of its instrumental value—in particular, even if it had no instrumental value, it would still be of value.

In saying that truth has final value, is one committed to treating all truths as finally valuable? That's certainly one possible reading of this claim, but I don't think that it is obligatory. It would be enough that truth is the kind of thing that is finally valuable, which would be compatible with there being particular truths that lack final value. (Compare: in saying that tigers are fierce one is merely making a kind claim about the nature of tigers, one that is compatible with the existence of some tame tigers). In any case, as we will see in a moment, I don't think we should be interpreting the thesis that truth is fundamentally valuable in a way that entails treating all truths as equally valuable in the relevant respect anyway.

Thinking of truth as a fundamental value in the sense of being finally valuable puts it into the same category as other goods that are plausibly finally valuable, such as friendship or beauty. Now of course one might be sceptical that anything is finally valuable. Notice, however, that some things had better be finally valuable if anything is to be valuable, finally or instrumentally. The idea that there are only instrumentally valuable goods is obviously incoherent, as instrumental value is a kind of promissory note indicating deferred value, and if nothing is finally valuable then that promissory note is worthless. This means that the options here are not between maintaining that some things are finally valuable and maintaining that there is only instrumental value, but between maintaining that some things are finally valuable and being a value nihilist (i.e., holding that nothing is valuable). Nonetheless, value nihilism is surely an option here, and of course if one accepts that thesis then obviously truth is not a final value as nothing is valuable—the claim that truth is not a fundamental value would thus be trivial. In what follows, however, I am going to put value nihilism to one side and focus on how best to make sense of the idea of truth as a final value on the assumption that there are final values.

In maintaining that something has final value, one is according it a special axiological status. Someone who fixates on that which is only instrumentally valuable, as the miser values money, has made a terrible mistake. (Think of those famous portraits of the miser, dirty, hungry, alone in his hovel dressed in rags, but surrounded by piles of gold). The things that we should care most about are those things that are finally valuable. That which is only instrumentally valuable is still valuable, but it would be mistake to only value that which is instrumentally valuable, or to value that which is instrumentally valuable as if it were finally valuable.

That doesn't mean, however, that we should care about that which is finally valuable to the exclusion of all else. We've already noted that final value doesn't preclude instrumental value. But we should also note that there are other candidates for final value that are as plausible in this regard as truth is (perhaps even more so). Accordingly, just as it would be a mistake to fixate on that which is only instrumentally valuable to the exclusion of that which is finally valuable, so it would be a mistake to fixate on one kind of finally valuable good to the exclusion of all others. For example, one can obsessively pursue truth and in the process fail to recognize other finally valuable goods (such as friendship). In saying that truth is finally valuable, we are thus not committed to maintaining that it should be pursued to the exclusion of all else, but only that it should have a special weight in our concerns, alongside other finally valuable goods (and other instrumentally valuable goods too).

5. Even with truth as a fundamental value so understood, there is a further concern on the horizon. It is commonly held that to treat truth as having a special value, even if only from a purely epistemic point of view, entails treating all truths as equally valuable.⁸ For example, it is often alleged that if truth has special value, then one should value trivial truths just as much as deep and important ones, given that they are both equally truths.⁹ Similarly, it has been claimed that to treat truth as having special value means that one should maximize one's true beliefs, regardless of the content of those beliefs. For example, someone who cares about truth in this way should be motivated to pursue easy inquiries that lead to lots of trivial true beliefs as opposed to pursuing difficult inquiries that might be unsuccessful (as many important scientific lines of inquiry are, for instance). The former will lead to more true beliefs, after all, so why isn't it preferable from the point of view of according truth a special value?¹⁰

If the foregoing were correct, then it would follow that there is something deeply amiss with the idea that truth is finally valuable, as clearly we ought not value all truths equally nor should we aim to maximize our true beliefs regardless of their content (such as by pursuing pointless inquiries that nonetheless lead to lots of trivial true beliefs). It doesn't take much reflection on the matter to realize that these objections must be misdirected, however. For notice that it is not just that we all agree that we should value significant truths over trivial truths (and significant lines of inquiry over trivial ones, even if the latter leads to more true beliefs), but that it is also clear that we do so precisely because we care about the truth. That is, someone who opts for the deep scientific truth about the universe over the trivial truth about, say, the number of spoons in a kitchen cupboard does so because she cares about the truth. This person reveals their concern for the truth in displaying this preference. The same goes for someone who pursues the important line of inquiry, albeit knowing that it might be unsuccessful, over the trivial inquiry that she knows in advance will likely lead to success (albeit of a pointless kind). We immediately recognize that this is just what caring about the truth involves.

The crux of the matter is that caring about the truth doesn't mean caring about all truths equally. Instead, to care about the truth is precisely to care about significant truths. Note that the claim in play here is not that there are two separate values at issue, truth and significance, but rather that caring about the truth manifests itself in caring about significant truths. That is, one is only tracking one good, not two. It is not that significant truths are a kind of truth that is valuable because significant, but rather that the proper concern for truth does not manifest itself in a desire for true beliefs *simpliciter* at all (which would lead to the view that all truths are equally valuable), but

a desire for significant truths. Compare the trivial truth concerning how many spoons there are in the kitchen cupboard with the significant truth about the fundamental nature of the universe. While they are both true propositions, the latter is a weightier truth than the former, and hence something that someone who cares about the truth would desire (all other things being equal). Significance here is thus tracking a veritic quality (we'll come back to this point in a moment).

Note that there is another kind of significance at issue with regard to caring about truth. As we've previously noted, treating truth as finally valuable isn't a straightforward matter when there are other goods in play, both finally and instrumentally valuable, that are competing for one's attention. Accordingly, when making an assessment about whether a particular truth should be pursued in inquiry one needs to weigh-up other factors, such as the practical costs of such an inquiry, the opportunity costs of pursuing other inquiries or simply doing something else instead, and so on. There is thus a non-veritic notion of 'significance' that has a bearing on such deliberations, such that one is interested in the practical utility of the truth in question. Since even the most trivial truths can sometimes have such utility (as when one needs to find out some item of trivia for a pub quiz), this notion of 'significance' isn't quite the specifically veritic notion we have in mind when we say that caring for the truth entails caring for significant truths. A good inquirer should be attentive to *both* kinds of significance, both veritic and non-veritic. Even so, it is useful to keep these two kinds of significance apart, as they are very different.

6. While the non-veritic significance of a particular truth is relatively straightforward, understanding what is involved in veritic significance is much harder. That certain truths provide one with a greater grip on the nature of things than other truths is relatively clear, but what does it mean to gain a greater grip on the truth where this is not to be reduced to counting true beliefs? I think a useful metaphor in this respect is map-making. In caring about the truth we want to gain an understanding of reality in its fundamental respects. Although I don't think that reality in this sense is restricted to the physical world around us, that's a good place to start. Understanding one's physical environment requires constructing a map of it. A good map, however, has certain structural features. Someone who attempts to map a region by simply amassing lots of detail about one small area within that region is not constructing a good map. Indeed, a much less detailed map that nonetheless accurately sketches the main contours of the terrain would be a much better map. This is akin to the contrast between someone acquiring lots of trivial true beliefs as opposed to focusing on veritically significant truths. The latter are significant in the sense that they afford one a grip on the nature of

reality that is not provided by, for example, being aware of trivial truths about the number of spoons in one's kitchen cupboard.

The map metaphor is also useful in that the same region can be mapped in different, but entirely compatible, ways—compare physical, political and topographical maps. Similarly, one's grasp of the fundamental nature of reality can be on different levels too. One potential downside of the map metaphor is that it privileges conceptions of reality that are physical in nature, but I don't think we should be so restricted. Our social reality demands understanding too, for example. Similarly, understanding of one's self is just as important as understanding the world around one. And so on. This is why a concern for the truth can manifest itself in both reading great literature and conducting scientific inquiries. No doubt there can be differing conceptions of what really is important in this regard, but all that's required for our purposes is a recognition of the difference between inquiries that are aimed at veritically significant truths and those that are aimed at trivial truths. In treating the truth as finally valuable, one is thereby concerned with the former and not the latter.¹¹

Once we understand the desire for truth as being concerned with veritically significant truths in this way, then I think this also explains why another kind of objection to truth as a fundamental value fails to hit its target. According to this concern, the truth can't be what we fundamentally care about, even from a purely epistemic point of view, because what we seek is not merely the truth but knowledge and understanding of the truth. For example, a good inquirer doesn't conclude their inquiry once they get to the truth, but only once they have knowledge or understanding of this truth.

I agree that good inquirers are concerned with knowing and understanding the truth, but I don't think that this shows that truth is not a fundamental epistemic good. To begin with, recall that knowledge is a factive epistemic standing, and so brings with the truth with it. Moreover, I take it that the relevant sense of understanding is also factive; indeed, in the normal case, it is a kind of knowing. For example, one might know the answer to a question, but fail to understand it, as when one knows the answer simply because one was told it by someone authoritative but the answer makes little sense to one. In contrast, one would in addition understand that answer if one were able to reconstruct why this answer is correct.¹² With this point in mind, the idea of drawing a contrast between desiring the truth and desiring knowledge or understanding is already quite odd, as in desiring the latter one is also desiring the truth, in the specific sense of the kind of apprehension of the truth involved in knowledge and understanding.

Of course, one might respond to this point by insisting that what we really care about is not *merely* the truth, but rather knowledge and understanding of it. But think about this for a moment. Doesn't knowledge and understanding simply involve a more comprehensive grip on the truth than mere true belief (e.g., of a kind that one might get by having luckily true belief, the product of a mere hunch say)? Indeed, if one wishes to measure one's grip on the truth in terms of counting true beliefs—an approach that we've shown above to be fundamentally flawed—then one can capture the point in play by noting that someone who has knowledge or understanding will have more true beliefs than someone who only has the corresponding mere true belief. For example, where one's understanding of an answer to a question consists of knowing why it is correct, then this will involve further true beliefs regarding this explanation, over and above the true belief in the target proposition (i.e., the answer to the question).

We don't need to revert back to the idea of measuring one's grip on the truth by counting true beliefs to capture this point, however. A better approach is simply to recognize the general veritic significance of knowing and understanding truths as opposed to merely truly believing them. That is, where caring for the truth involves gaining a grip on the fundamental nature of reality (and not merely amassing true beliefs indiscriminately), then it also manifests itself in seeking knowledge and understanding of the subject matters that one is concerned with, as that is precisely what enables one to gain to 'grip' in question. Properly understood, then, there are not distinct goals in play here—a desire for truth and a desire for something over and above truth like knowledge and understanding—but rather simply the desire for truth that naturally manifests itself in seeking out knowledge and understanding of the truth.¹³

7. We are now in a position draw together some of the main threads of our discussion. Treating truth as finally valuable doesn't mean prioritizing the truth over everything else, including other finally valuable goods, nor does it mean ignoring the axiological relevance of non-finally valuable goods. Moreover, it also doesn't entail that one is concerned to maximize one's true beliefs, regardless of their significance. In particular, it doesn't entail treating every true belief as being equally valuable. Seeking the truth means seeking veritically significant truths, and that's why in seeking the truth one isn't concerned with any and all true propositions. It is also why we seek to know and understand the truths that we inquire into.

With all this mind, let's consider our terrible truths from earlier, and also the truths that, it was alleged, one simply cannot believe (e.g., that one lacks free will or that one is radically mistaken),

and the truths that one cannot believe in a specifically K-apt sense (e.g., the everyday certainties that constitute one's hinge commitments). The key question is whether treating truth as a fundamental value entails being unable to embrace these claims about our overall epistemic position. I think it should be clear that the putative tension here is illusory. Treating truth as a final value doesn't entail always valuing the truth, much less valuing it over everything else. In particular, it's compatible with truth being a final value that one is aware that there are inherent limitations on one's capacity to recognize, or otherwise fully embrace, those truths. Indeed, someone who cares about the truth in the sense that we have set out ought to be very interested in this very fact about the human condition. So someone who cares about the truth should be interested in the fact that our human psychology leads us to compartmentalize our knowledge of suffering, death and the oblivion that awaits us. Similarly, someone who cares about the truth can consistently recognize that there can be truths that we are unable to believe at all, such as that one lacks free will or is radically in error. It also follows that there is no inherent inconsistency in a truth seeker coming to realize that their everyday commonsense convictions are not the result of ratiocination but rather reflect a primitive certainty. In all these cases, caring about the truth means realizing that there can be inherent limitations on one's truth-seeking.¹⁴ There is thus a perfectly respectable notion of treating truth as a fundamental good that doesn't fall foul of the various challenges that we have considered.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ He describes the truth in this way in several places—see Leiter (2018) for a helpful summary, and also an acute discussion of what Nietzsche means by this description.

² Nietzsche was especially influenced by Schopenhauer in this regard, who embraces an overarching pessimism. See, for example, Janaway (1999) and Fernández (2006).

³ See Wittgenstein (1969, §§341-43). I refer to the overarching hinge commitment that one is not radically mistaken as the *über hinge commitment*, to distinguish it from the more specific hinge commitments (discussed below) that are manifestations of the *über hinge commitment*. See Pritchard (2015, part 2).

⁴ Some commentators have tried to argue that there can be some kind of indirect rationality that applies to this basic certainty, in virtue of the essential role that it plays in enabling our rational practices to occur. See, especially, Wright (2004) and Coliva (2015). My own view—see Pritchard (2015, part 2)—is that this is not a credible way of understanding these commitments, but it would take us too far afield to argue for this point here.

⁵ See especially Pritchard (2015, *passim*). There are, of course, numerous readings of Wittgenstein’s remarks on hinge commitments available. See especially Strawson (1985), McGinn (1989), Williams (1991), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Wright (2004), Coliva (2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For a survey of this literature, see Pritchard (2017).

⁶ See Pritchard (2015, part 2) for more on the idea of our hinge commitments not being K-aptness beliefs (even while still being beliefs in the folk sense of belief). For a useful taxonomy of different belief-like notions, see Stevenson (2002).

⁷ The idea that there may be truths that we are so constituted—in this case in terms of our biological endowment—to be unable to recognize is also found in Chomsky’s work. See, for example, Chomsky (2015, ch. 2).

⁸ Elsewhere, I have described the idea that truth is the fundamental good from a purely epistemic point of view *epistemic value truth monism*. See, for example, Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 1). This draws the contrast both to forms of epistemic value pluralism (i.e., where there is more than one fundamental epistemic good) and alternative forms of epistemic value monism (e.g., where knowledge or understanding are held to be the fundamental epistemic good). I defend epistemic value truth monism in Pritchard (2014*b*; 2016*a*; 2019; 2021*b*; 2021*c*; 2022). For more on the idea of truth as the fundamental good from a purely epistemic point of view, see David (2001), DePaul (2001), and the exchange between David (2013) and Kvanvig (2013).

⁹ There are lots of presentations of this trivial truths problem in the literature, but for a clear articulation of the issue, see DePaul (2001, §2). For an influential statement of the problem that urges a virtue-theoretic response, see Sosa (2003). For a recent discussion of this problem, see Treanor (2018).

¹⁰ For a particularly clear statement of the trivial inquiry problem in the recent literature, see Elgin (2017, 10).

¹¹ I further remark on this notion of veritic significance in Pritchard (2019; 2021*b*; 2022). Note that in these works I further associate the veritistic drive in play with the manifestation of intellectual virtue. For our current purposes, however, we can bracket this additional claim. All that matters for our present concerns is the negative point that treating truth as a fundamental value is not to be understood in the problematic ways described here.

¹² For further discussion of the relationship between understanding and knowledge, see Kvanvig (2003), Grimm (2006; 2014), Pritchard (2009*b*; 2014*a*), Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2010, ch. 4), Greco (2013), and Hills (2016). Note that while most commentators agree that understanding is a more demanding epistemic state than knowledge, there is some dissent on this score. For example, some figures like Zagzebski (2001) and Elgin (2009) argue that understanding is not a form of knowing at all since it isn’t in the relevant sense *factive*. In addition, on my view understanding isn’t always a more demanding epistemic state than knowledge (though it ordinarily is), as sometimes one’s understanding can fall short of knowing due to environmental epistemic luck (though such cases where understanding comes apart from knowledge are not relevant to our current purposes). For a helpful overview of the contemporary literature on the epistemology of understanding, see Grimm (2010).

¹³ A related confusion in this regard is the thought that since inquiry only usually properly concludes when one gains knowledge or understanding of the answer to the target question, then it follows that only knowledge or understanding, and not truth, can be the goal of inquiry (and thus the fundamental epistemic good). As I’ve argued elsewhere, this line of reasoning is flawed. For one thing, we should be wary about equating what properly concludes an activity with the goal of that activity, particularly when we are talking about apprehending that a goal has been attained. (A chef concerned to create delicious food might naturally insist on tasting the delicious food once cooked to be sure that her cooking was successful, but this wouldn’t show that her real goal was the tasting of delicious food rather than the creation of it). But the more general point is that it is a mistake to think that the desire for truth equates with a desire for mere true beliefs anyway, rather than the desire for veritically significant truths, and thus truths that support knowledge and understanding. For more on these points, see Pritchard (2014*b*; 2016*a*; 2016*b*; 2019; 2021*a*; 2021*d*). For defences of the contrasting view that it is knowledge that is the goal of inquiry, see Millar (2011) and Kelp (2014; 2018).

¹⁴ Note that it doesn't follow from this claim that one should be intellectually sanguine about these limitations. Indeed, as I argue in Pritchard (2015, part 4; 2020), the recognition that one has fundamental commitments that are in their nature not grounded in reasons (and hence are not truth-tracking) can naturally lead to a kind of intellectual anxiety that I call *epistemic vertigo*.

¹⁵ Acknowledgements.