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Truth is not (very) Intrinsically Valuable

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**Abstract:** We might suppose it is not only instrumentally valuable for beliefs to be true, but that it is *intrinsically* valuable — truth makes a non-derivative, positive contribution to a belief’s overall value. Some intrinsic goods are better than others, though, and this paper considers the question of *how good* truth is, compared to other intrinsic goods. I argue that truth is the worst of all intrinsic goods; every other intrinsic good is better than it. I also suggest the best explanation for truth’s inferiority is that it is not really an intrinsic good at all. It is intrinsically neutral.

# I. Introduction

For various reasons, we might suppose that truth is a valuable property of beliefs, and that its value is not only instrumental.[[1]](#endnote-1) The most familiar sort of non-instrumental value is *intrinsic* value, the value something has in itself and apart from its relationship to anything else. This is not the only form of non-instrumental value,[[2]](#endnote-2) but if truth is non-instrumentally good, it might be intrinsically good. Indeed, it is a common cultural trope, commonly encountered in defenses of funding for basic research and the liberal arts, that truth is valuable “for its own sake,” and the most obvious interpretation of that claim is that truth is intrinsically valuable. William Frankena (1973, pp. 87-9) includes true belief in his catalog of intrinsic goods, and he draws special attention to the familiar “triad of truth, goodness, and beauty, usually spelled with capital letters” as a classic list of intrinsic goods. More recently, Jonathan Kvanvig (2008) and Michael Lynch (2009) have defended the idea that true belief is valuable for its own sake.

To call truth intrinsically good is not to say that, for every true proposition, it is good in itself that the proposition is true. It is true that more than a billion people live in conditions of absolute poverty.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is not good in itself that that is true. Rather, to call truth intrinsically good is to say it is good *as a property of beliefs.*

If it were good in itself simply to have beliefs, then, trivially, it would be good in itself to have true beliefs, even if true belief were no better in itself than error. To have any substance, the claim that truth is good in itself must be construed to say that truth *confers* value on beliefs, making true belief better in that respect than error or ignorance. On its most plausible interpretation, then, the claim that truth is intrinsically good amounts to the claim that the truth of a belief makes a distinctive positive contribution to its overall value. That contribution is to be understood as fundamental. It is not that truth makes a belief better by virtue of making it more useful, for example. It is that beliefs are made better simply by *being true.*

I will argue for two theses in this paper. First, if truth is intrinsically good at all, its intrinsic goodness is literally minimal. The bold version of this thesis claims that any amount of any other good is better in itself than any amount of truth alone. A more modest version claims that that no amount of truth alone is better in itself than any amount of any other good. The second thesis aims to explain why truth is inferior to (or no better than) all other goods. In my view, truth is inferior because it is not intrinsically good at all. It is intrinsically neutral.[[4]](#endnote-4)

If I am right, then we probably should not believe that truth is (very) intrinsically valuable. I will not argue that this makes it inappropriate to care about truth for its own sake, or that we should lessen the degree to which we do. Rather, I think, if anything does make it appropriate to care about truth for its own sake, it is not the intrinsic value of truth as a property of beliefs.[[5]](#endnote-5)

# II. Intrinsic and Overriding Goodness

The following line of argument might be tempting: If truth is good in itself, then it is better to believe a truth than to disbelieve it or to withhold judgment, independently of all other considerations. There are circumstances, though, in which it is *not* better to believe a truth than to believe its denial or to withhold judgment. For example, my last days might be considerably more pleasant if I do not believe they are my last days, or I might be better off not believing the truth about my flight’s departure time if it is doomed to crash in the mountains (Stich 1990). So, since believing the truth is not always better than disbelieving it or withholding judgment, truth is not intrinsically good.

That line of argument makes an obvious mistake. It conflates *intrinsic* value with *overriding* value. The sense in which it might be better to believe the truth “independently of all other considerations” is not that it is always best overall to believe truths, no matter what. Rather, the idea is that truth’s value is not derivative from other considerations. It is consistent with the idea that truth is intrinsically valuable that other values might outweigh it in particular circumstances.

A common but, in my view, objectionable way to make this point is to say that truth is “prima facie” good or that it is good “other things being equal” (Lynch 2004, p. 46; Kvanvig 2009, p. 351). If something is prima facie good, it has qualities that defeasibly justify us in supposing it is good. Likewise, if a chair is prima facie sturdy, it has qualities that defeasibly justify us in supposing it is sturdy. A prima facie sturdy chair might turn out to be flimsy, and something that is prima facie good might turn out to be bad after all. Prima facie sturdiness is not a form of sturdiness, and prima facie goodness is not a form of goodness.

There are additional problems with characterizing truth as good “other things being equal” or saying that, if *p* is true, it is better, other things being equal, to believe *p* than to disbelieve it or withhold judgment. The problems stem from questions about *which* other things we are to assume equal. Likely candidates include the practical consequences of holding the belief, the costs involved in acquiring the belief, the other propositions one believes, the justificatory status of the doxastic attitudes in question, and the state of the world apart from the matter whether *p.*

All those “other things” are potentially relevant to whether it is best to believe, to disbelieve, or to withhold judgment on *p*, but it is impossible to hold them all constant in the cases we compare. Suppose we want to hold the degree of epistemic justification constant, comparing a case in which one believes *p* with a certain degree of justification to a case in which one believes ~*p* with equal justification. To keep the degree of justification constant, we must allow something else to vary between the cases—such as the contents of one’s other beliefs, the details of the causal histories of the belief that *p* and the belief that *~p*, or the reliability of the processes that produce those beliefs. Because holding some potentially relevant factors constant requires allowing others to vary, we cannot sensibly claim that it’s better to believe a truth than not to, “other things being equal*.*” We need a specific account of what those other things are.

This is not the tired and familiar objection that ‘*p*, other things being equal’ amounts to ‘*p*, except when not-*p*’. That objection depends on the heterogeneity and open-endedness of the set of relevant other things. The problem here, in contrast, is simply that other things *can’t* be equal; holding some of them constant requires allowing others to vary.

I suspect efforts to characterize truth’s value as “prima facie goodness” or “goodness other things being equal” probably involve clumsy turns of phrase rather than deep philosophical errors. The point in making these claims is just to say that truth has what I have been calling “intrinsic” value. Though it is not always better overall or all things considered to believe a truth than not to, if *all* we take into account is the fact that *p* is true, it is better to believe that *p* than to disbelieve it or have no opinion.

Jonathan Kvanvig (2008) claims that truth has “unrestricted,” “unqualified,” or “unconditional” value. (He uses the terms interchangeably.) So far as I can tell, he means by this what I have meant by the claim that truth is intrinsically good: Truth always makes a positive contribution to the overall value of a belief, but other factors can and sometimes do make negative contributions that render the belief bad all things considered or that, all things considered, make believing the truth that *p* no better than disbelieving or withholding judgment. Kvanvig’s terms also seem to suggest that there is no limit to how good truth is, or that truth is *infinitely* good, but that is not Kvanvig’s view. He is aware that truth’s value can be outweighed by other considerations, and his project is to explain how truth can make an independent (but not overriding) contribution to the value of a belief. To avoid confusion, then, I will persist in using the vocabulary of “intrinsic” value, rather than Kvanvig’s vocabulary of “unrestricted,” “unqualified,” and “unconditional” value.

It is not always best, all things considered, to believe the truth. That does not mean truth is not intrinsically valuable. Rather, it means that truth’s intrinsic value is *finite*. Even if it is good for its own sake, it is not so good that nothing else could make a true belief bad to have, all things considered. An acknowledgment that truth’s value is finite, though, invites us to consider just *how much* value there is in truth in the first place. To answer that question, we need to consider a special class of true beliefs.

# III. The Importance of Pointlessness

Some true propositions are good for us to believe, some are bad for us, and some are what Kvanvig (2008) calls “pointless” truths. There is no value in believing such propositions, apart from whatever value inheres in true belief itself.[[6]](#endnote-6) We have no reason to learn these truths, apart from the fact that they are true. Some examples might include the truth about how many grains of sand are in some randomly selected handful, about how many blades of grass are in my back yard, or about what number is equal to the ratio of the number of Smiths in Smithville, Tennessee, to the number of Joneses in Jonesboro, Arkansas (the Smith/Jones ratio).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Pointless truths provide an important test for the view that truth is intrinsically valuable. We have nothing but truth to gain or lose in believing a pointless truth or not. If truth is intrinsically valuable, it should be good to believe pointless truths. Moreover, if it is not good to believe pointless truths, it would appear that truth’s value is not intrinsic after all. Instead, the value of believing something true is derivative from what else we stand to gain from believing it (or to lose from not believing it).

Either the number of blades of grass in my back yard is prime, or it is not prime. Presumably, it is a pointless truth which. But none of us are at all motivated to try to find out whether I have a prime number of blades of grass in my yard. Our lack of motivation is not a mistake, and so believing the truth about this matter appears not to be very important. It does not look better than being ignorant or having a false belief. Such cases appear to count against the idea that truth is good in itself.

Kvanvig argues that cases such as this are misleading (2008, pp. 209-10). We are not motivated to find out whether there is a prime number of blades of grass in my yard, but that is only because we are not gods. We have limited resources to apply to our problems, and we have many more pressing concerns than answering that question. We have every reason not to *find out* the truth in this case, but *believing* the truth would still be good. It just wouldn’t be good enough to divert our attention from more important things.

Kvanvig supports this view by appeal to intuitions about a situation in which resources are not limited, and there are no more pressing concerns:

To imagine such a situation is to imagine a world where no practical needs are left unmet and where no limitation of cognitive power creates any need for informational content to trump any value for truths with little or no content. … [T]here is no need to favor organized theories or elegant axiomatizations based on any practical or non-epistemic interests such as efficiency for prediction and control or even the beauty of such a system. … We should ask ourselves, regarding possible individuals in such a cost-free environment, what the cognitive ideal would involve. Here [believers in the intrinsic value of truth] have millennia of theological reflection on their side. Part of the cognitive ideal, whatever else it might involve, is knowledge of all truths; omniscience for short. But for omniscience to be part of the ideal, no truth can be pointless enough to play no role at all in the story of what it takes to be cognitively ideal. (2008, pp. 209-10)

Michael Lynch makes a similar point:

There are all sorts of trivial truths that are not worth believing, given my limited intellect and time. Nonetheless, were these limits not in place—were it to be the case that believing the truth was cost-free, so to speak—then it would be good to believe all and only what is true. (2009, p. 227)

On the Kvanvig-Lynch view, it may not be worth our effort to *acquire* a large number of pointless true beliefs, but *having* them is still better than not. It is better to be omniscient than just to be really, really smart, even if the difference is largely a matter of having or lacking pointless true beliefs.

It will be helpful to consider a variation on this line of reasoning. Let us call a truth that is not pointless *important.* Imagine two beings. One is *totally omniscient*. It believes all and only what is true. The second is *practically omniscient*. It doesn’t believe any pointless truths, but it does believe all the important truths (apart from those that conjoin or disjoin important truths with pointless ones—those complex truths are pointless for a being who already believes their important components).[[8]](#endnote-8)

The totally omniscient being seems to be *better* in an important way than the one who is only practically omniscient. It seems to realize better what Kvanvig calls “the cognitive ideal,” and that suggests we value even pointless true beliefs over pointless ignorance.[[9]](#endnote-9) It supports the idea that, were we not limited as we are, we *would* be motivated to learn the truth about the blades of grass in my yard, because it is better to believe that truth than not to. On Kvanvig’s view, even in the case of pointless truths, truth’s value is on the scene. The value just happens to be outweighed because, when we have *nothing* but truth to gain, we must focus our efforts on other problems. Our need to focus our efforts elsewhere does not mean truth is unimportant or worthless. It means only that truth is not the most important thing.

Kvanvig thinks his view has the advantage of explaining why there seem to be two kinds of pointless truths. The first, such as the truth about the Smith/Jones ratio, are trivialities we are not inclined to pursue. The second category, though, comprises apparently pointless truths that we *are* motivated to pursue. We explore the universe just to find out what’s out there. We conduct experiments just to find out what happens. We do metaphysics. If the only value in truth comes from the further good to be gained when we believe something true, we should have no reason to pursue such research. But if truth is intrinsically valuable, then its intrinsic value gives us a reason to try to uncover even basic truths that do not promise to yield any further benefits.

There thus might appear to be two main ways to think about truth’s value. According to one, the value of believing what is true derives from the benefits true beliefs enable us to obtain. According to the other, believing what is true might be good in itself. Kvanvig criticizes the former view (which he calls “pragmatism”) on the grounds that it cannot account for why we are ever justified in pursuing pointless truths, as in some basic research, and on the grounds that it is at odds with the intuitive superiority of omniscience to the alternatives. He thinks the latter view (which he calls “intellectualism”), in contrast, accords with our intuitions about omniscience and justifies the pursuit of basic research.

**IV. The Minimality of Truth’s Intrinsic Value**

The case for truth’s intrinsic value rests on intuitions about omniscience and the cognitive ideal. Those intuitions seem to indicate that, if only we had no other interests or needs, we would be motivated to learn even the most boringly pointless truths. The way Kvanvig and Lynch describe it, truth’s intrinsic value is so great that it is better to have a true belief than not—so long as it costs us nothing to acquire and nothing to have. Truth, as they put it, is so good we should want it when it is “cost-free.”**[[10]](#endnote-10)**

This is the merest quantum of value. It is distinguishable from neutrality only in the fantastical case of someone without cognitive limitations, without other concerns, interests or needs, or who somehow gains benefits from inquiry that precisely offset the costs involved in pursuing it. We are not like that. We have cognitive limitations. We have concerns and interests other than truth, and we have needs that can conflict with the conduct of inquiry into all questions. If truth’s intrinsic value is invisible except when nothing else is at stake, then truth’s intrinsic value might as well *always* be invisible, and we have no reason to think truth is more important than anything else we value. Suppose truth is intrinsically better than intrinsic evils or intrinsic neutrals. So what? What price should we be willing to pay for truth for its own sake? What goods should we be willing to forgo, and what ills should we be willing to suffer?

The intuition that total omniscience is better than practical omniscience gives no answer to those questions, unless the answer is “none.” Maybe some people are willing to pay a price for the sake of truth alone, and maybe some of them have the intuition that truth for its own sake is worth the price they are willing to pay. There is no clear reason to think their intuition reflects something about how intrinsically good truth is, rather than just how much they happen to like truth (or how much final value they assign it).

I suspect that some people derive satisfaction or pleasure from knowing pointless truths, or from knowing pointless truths of certain sorts. Sometimes, a question comes up and captures our attention. We experience the “irritation of doubt,” as C. S. Peirce called it, and we want the irritation to be relieved. Some readers, for example, might still be wondering what the Smith/Jones ratio is. The question has come up, without being answered. For some people, an unanswered question is as unpleasant as hearing “shave and a haircut” without its concluding “two bits.” The only way to soothe the irritation is to find the answer.

The greater the irritation of doubt, or the more satisfaction and pleasure one gets from knowing a pointless truth, the more one rationally ought to be willing to pay for it. The heavy lifting in this case seems to be done by the value of *satisfaction at having the truth*, or the disvalue of *irritation at not having the truth.* The value truth contributes to a belief, independently of its relation to such states as satisfaction or irritation, appears not to matter. This is not to say that no one cares about truth for its own sake. Part of caring about truth for its own sake might be that one takes pleasure in having true beliefs, even when they are pointless. Our question is not what motivates people to pursue or maintain pointless true beliefs, but what makes it good when such a person has (or acquires) one. What contribution, if any, does the truth of the belief itself make?

I might be willing to endure only three seconds of mild discomfort to gain a new pointless true belief, and you might be willing to endure three minutes. I see no grounds for claiming that you are overvaluing truth, nor do I see grounds for you to claim I am undervaluing it. Truth seems to be the sort of thing it is *permissible* to value, but there seems to be no particular degree to which we *ought* to value it. If truth were better in itself than any other goods, there would be a degree to which we ought to value it. We ought to value it more than whatever other goods it exceeds in value, because it is a mistake to prefer the worse to the better.

Here, then, is the argument for the claim that truth is, at best, the worst of all intrinsic goods. If truth were intrinsically better than anything, then there would be nonzero prices (in the form of evils accepted or goods forgone) we ought be willing to pay for pointless truths, such that unwillingness to pay those prices amounts to undervaluing truth. There are no such prices. Therefore, truth is not intrinsically better than anything else intrinsically good. Either it is intrinsically neutral, or it is the worst of all intrinsic goods.

The case with other supposedly intrinsic goods is different. Suppose, as one might, that pleasure and beauty are both intrinsically good. In that case, someone unwilling to sacrifice a small pleasure (one more bite of chocolate cake, for example) for the sake of a great aesthetic good (say, preserving the *Mona Lisa*) is making a mistake in his valuing. Likewise, someone unwilling to pay a very small aesthetic price for a very large hedonic gain is making a mistake. There are nonzero prices we ought to be willing to pay, in the form of ills accepted or goods forgone, for the sake of pleasure and beauty. This is an important difference in value between pleasure and beauty, on the one hand, and truth on the other.**[[11]](#endnote-11)**

**V. Incommensurability?**

There is no nonzero amount of discomfort such that, if you are unwilling to endure it to find out the Smith/Jones ratio, you are undervaluing truth. Given the choice between total omniscience accompanied by a headache of *x* seconds and practical omniscience accompanied by no headache, there is no positive value of *x* such that one would be undervaluing truth not to accept total omniscience along with the headache.

The intrinsic value of truth thus looks staggeringly small, but that might be only an appearance. Maybe this is a case of incommensurability. Maybe there are no intrinsic goods worse than truth because truth’s value is *sui generis* and can’t be compared with anything else. The idea would be that truth *seems* only minimally intrinsically valuable, but that is just because its variety of intrinsic goodness is not measurable on hedonic, aesthetic, or whatever other scales of intrinsic value we might come up with. Thus it does not tell us anything about truth’s intrinsic value that there are no hedonic, aesthetic, or other prices we should be willing to pay for genuinely pointless true beliefs.

This view is implausible. There clearly are *some* amounts of aesthetic or hedonic goodness that surpass the value of truth. Given the choice between permanently ending starvation and malnutrition, or learning the Smith/Jones ratio, there should be no question but that one should choose ending starvation and malnutrition. And if a genie offered to tell me the truth about how many blades of grass are in my yard, at the cost of obliterating all traces of the *Mona Lisa* from the universe, the gain in truth would be obviously too little to make up for the loss in beauty. So, it appears, some other goods are better than truth. But if there are goods better than truth, the value of truth must not be incomparable with other values after all.

Some amounts of beauty or pleasure are better in themselves than truth is in itself. Though there may be hard cases (such as extremely faint and fleeting pleasant experiences), there are no quantities of beauty or pleasure we clearly ought to be willing to forgo for the sake of truth alone, and there is no amount of pointless truth that is obviously better than the occurrence of any discomfort, the loss of any pleasure, or the destruction of any beauty. Someone might be willing to endure a millisecond of discomfort to learn a million pointless truths, but it is hard to see how someone who is *unwilling* to do so is making a mistake in her valuing. She certainly is not making a mistake like that of someone who would not sacrifice all traces of something with little aesthetic value (e.g., the deplorable 1952 novelty song, “(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window?”) for the sake of a great moral good, such as permanently ending to world hunger.

This makes truth different from other intrinsic goods, such as pleasure and beauty. Even if we cannot establish a strict rate of exchange between pleasure and beauty, there are clear cases in which we ought to pay a small price in each for a large gain in the other. But there are no clear cases in which we ought to pay a small aesthetic or hedonic price for a large gain in truth alone (that is, for the sake of believing a large number of genuinely pointless truths). It might be rationally *permissible* to pay such a price, but those who would not pay it are not guilty of undervaluing truth.

Thus we can come up with something like a rate of exchange for truth with respect to other goods. No positive amount of any other intrinsic good is intrinsically worse than any amount of truth (i.e., than any number of pointless true beliefs), though rationality allows individuals to care about truth enough to make some sacrifices in other goods for its sake. And since no amount of truth can exceed the value of any amount of another good, no matter how small, truth appears to be not only no better than any other goods, but *worse*.

**VI. Cognitive and Epistemic Value**

Maybe we have looked in the wrong place for intrinsic goods worse than truth. Some goods are aesthetic and some are hedonic, but truth is a *cognitive* or *epistemic* good. If there are other intrinsic cognitive or epistemic goods, then we might make the case that truth is better than them.

According to one plausible view, truth is the fundamental cognitive value. If anything else is cognitively good, its goodness derives from its relationship to true belief. If this view is correct, though, there are no intrinsic cognitive goods other than truth. Trivially, if there are no cognitive intrinsic goods *other than* truth, there are no cognitive intrinsic goods *worse than* truth.

Philosophers have occasionally proposed other cognitive intrinsic goods, such as rationality, knowledge, understanding, or empirical adequacy. Usually, such proposals also contend that these other goods are *more important than* truth. If any of those proposals are right, then truth may have cognitive competition, but it loses.

Suppose rationality, knowledge, or understanding is an intrinsic cognitive good other than truth. Such goods do not seem *less* valuable than truth. What is better, a rational and pointless false belief, or an irrational and pointless true one? How much rationality (or knowledge or understanding) should we be willing to sacrifice for more true belief, on pain of undervaluing truth in relation to these alternatives? Why shouldn’t I prefer *knowing* two pointless truths to *merely believing* three, or three hundred? If they are intrinsic goods at all, rationality, knowledge, and understanding are unlikely to be intrinsic goods less valuable than truth.

Some plausible cognitive goods, such as empirical adequacy, are a bit dicier. Maybe we should be willing to abandon more adequate theories in favor of theories that are closer to the truth. Maybe. But how that could happen is hard to conceive. After all, empirical adequacy is our test for truth. Even if it does turn out that we should sacrifice some empirical adequacy for truth, that may not be evidence that empirical adequacy is an intrinsic cognitive good worse than truth. Instead, it might be evidence that empirical adequacy is not an *intrinsic* cognitive good at all. Instead, empirical adequacy is something we care about *for the sake of truth*, as an indicator of the presence of something we care about for its own sake.

The best case for the existence of cognitive intrinsic goods worse than truth would run along these lines: There are some domains (such as matters of taste or ethics, perhaps) in which our beliefs are neither true nor false. These domains are “gappy.” Nevertheless, we recognize justified beliefs in those domains as better than unjustified ones. So, we care about justification even when it cannot be an indicator of truth, because there is no truth for it to indicate. In such cases, we care about justification for its own sake. In non-gappy domains, though, our concern for justification derives from our goal of believing the truth and from the fact that justification is a reliable indicator of truth. The best explanation for all this is that justification is a cognitive intrinsic good worse than truth. When there is no truth to be had, justification still has value because it has a measure of intrinsic value. But when there is truth to be had, it is more important than justification, either because the intrinsic value of truth is much greater than the intrinsic value of justified belief or because it somehow renders the value of justification irrelevant.**[[12]](#endnote-12)**

There are at least two serious problems with this line of argument. First, it does not really do much to show that justification is an *intrinsic* cognitive good. Suppose we care about justification even in gappy domains. Our concern could be an instance of our more general concern for the justification of our beliefs, and that more general concern might arise because, ordinarily, justification is a reliable indicator of truth. The value of justification could be wholly derivative from the value of truth, and yet we still might ascribe value to justification in domains where there is no truth to be had and no truth to be indicated.**[[13]](#endnote-13)**

Second, the premise that, when truth is to be had, it is more important than justification, is not clearly correct. If it were, then truth would be the obvious winner whenever truth and justification conflict. Truth is not the obvious winner in such cases. It is not always clear that it is better to have a true belief than a justified one. Two sorts of cases can illustrate this.

First consider a case in which the evidence bearing on a pointless truth is misleading. Suppose I have carefully counted the blades of grass in my yard and come up with a certain number, but a prankster has stolen one blade while I was not looking. I am justified in believing there are *x* blades of grass in my yard, but the truth is that there are *x* - 1. It is not at all obvious that it is better for me to have the unjustified, pointlessly true belief than the justified, pointlessly false one.

Second, imagine you have must choose between two Oracles who make pointless pronouncements. Oracle A speaks truly 60% of the time, but will make a pronouncement without no supporting explanations or arguments, and the oracle’s pronouncement will appear to be quite implausible, given what you already believe. Oracle B speaks truly 59.9% of the time. Her pronouncement will come with supporting explanations and arguments such that it appears quite plausible (and, indeed, to be much more than 60% likely to be true). To avoid other complications, suppose that after the choice, you will not remember anything about the oracles or the choice you made at all. You will simply have whatever beliefs the Oracle you chose gave you.

Here we have a conflict between truth and justification. If you choose Oracle B, you incur a greater risk of error for the sake of gaining a more justified belief. If you choose Oracle A, you accept lesser justification for the sake of gaining a belief more likely to be true. Not everyone is willing to risk truth for the sake of justification, but those who are willing do not seem to be mistaken in their valuing. Rather, there seems to be rationally permissible variation in how much we care about true belief relative to justified belief. If truth were always more valuable than justification, in domains where there is truth to be had, then it would be a mistake in one’s valuing to choose Oracle B. It is not a mistake, and so truth apparently is not always more valuable than justification.

Confining our attention to cognitive or epistemic value, then, we seem to face a dilemma. Either truth is the fundamental cognitive value, or it is not. If it is, there are no other cognitive intrinsic goods, and so there are no cognitive intrinsic goods worse than truth. If it is not, then it is far from clear that the alternatives are *worse* than truth. Either way, the case for the existence of cognitive goods that are both intrinsic and worse than truth looks weak.

**VII. From Minimalism to Nihilism**

I have been arguing that no intrinsic goods are intrinsically worse than truth. If truth is intrinsically valuable at all, it is only *minimally* intrinsically valuable. Given that truth is not intrinsically better than anything intrinsically valuable, one might doubt that truth is intrinsically valuable at all. Are there good reasons to think truth is intrinsically *neutral*?

One argument for truth’s neutrality draws on the same considerations that show truth is not better than anything intrinsically valuable. If truth were intrinsically valuable, the argument goes, then the accumulation of more true beliefs would amount to an accumulation of more intrinsic value: the more true beliefs one had, the better. It would be intrinsically better to have a billion pointless true beliefs than to have just one. A single pointless true belief might not be good enough to be worth enduring a ten minute headache or sacrificing five minutes of pleasantness, but a largeenough collection of pointless true beliefs would be good enough, if truth really were intrinsically valuable. As it happens, though, there is no quantity of pointless true beliefs—not ten, not a hundred, not a thousand, not a million or a billion—whose total value is so great that one would be irrationally undervaluing truth if one refused to endure a ten minute headache or to give up five minutes of pleasantness for the sake of acquiring that many true beliefs.

We might seek an explanation for why there is no such quantity. The obvious explanation is that additional pointless true beliefs add no value, and they add no value because truth is intrinsically neutral.[[14]](#endnote-14)

This argument is an inference to the best explanation; it offers the hypothesis that truth is intrinsically neutral as the best explanation for why there is no amount of pointless truth for which we ought to be willing to endure a ten minute headache or sacrifice five minutes of pleasure. That hypothesis amounts to what Kvanvig calls “pragmatism.” It cannot be the best explanation, though, if we have independent reason to reject it. Some of our intuitions do seem to count against the hypothesis. They include the intuition that some pointless true beliefs are worth pursuing after all, the intuition that a totally omniscient being is better off than a practically omniscient being, and perhaps the intuition (which I confess I lack) that it is better to believe more pointless truths than fewer.[[15]](#endnote-15) I call these “intellectualist intuitions,” because they form the core of the case for intellectualism.

As with any intuitions, we can and should ask where our intellectualist intuitions come from. Here is one explanatory hypothesis: we have them because they are true. Truth *really is* intrinsically valuable, and we are somehow able to pick up on that fact intuitively. For the intuitions to support intellectualism, that explanation, or something not far from it, would have to be the best one available. If, on the other hand, our intellectualist intuitions are readily explicable *without* supposing truth is intrinsically valuable, then our having them is not good evidence that truth is intrinsically valuable. The alternative explanations would undercut the support the intuitions give to intellectualism by showing that we would likely have the intuitions irrespective of their truth.

**VIII. Alternative Explanations of Intellectualist Intuitions**

There are at least three different ways of explaining our intellectualist intuitions without supposing truth is intrinsically valuable. One strategy appeals to the possibility that caring about truth for its own sake might be good for us. A second involves the conjecture that our attitude of caring about truth for its own sake could arise through a process of evaluative conditioning. A third explanation draws on the idea that the truth aim is built into the concept of belief. I will elaborate each explanation and show how it helps to undermine the explanation in terms of intrinsic value.

1. *Caring about Truth is Good for Us*

As a matter of fact, most of us do, to some extent, care about truth for its own sake. We are willing to pursue some pointless truths, and we would rather be totally omniscient than practically omniscient. Apart from any intrinsic value truth might have, though, we might benefit from caring about it for its own sake. We might benefit from having the attitudes that underlie our intellectualist intuitions, even if truth is not intrinsically valuable.

One intellectualist intuition is that some truths are worth pursuing through basic research, even though they are pointless.[[16]](#endnote-16) Such research can be worth doing if it produces other benefits—such as the discovery of other, non-pointless truths or the invention of technology that is useful for other purposes. The idea that we benefit from “spin offs” of basic research programs, which bring technological innovations made originally in the pursuit of pointless truths into wider application to improve people's lives, is old hat by now. It continues to be a popular component of cases for continued or increased funding for space exploration and basic research in the hard sciences.

There are other ways we plausibly benefit from the pursuit of pointless truths, and thus from the motivation to pursue them. At the individual level, there may be general cognitive benefits of puzzle-solving and playing abstract cognitive games, although the evidence is not clear (Salthouse 2006). Evidence from positive psychology links the possession of cognitive virtues, such as caring about truth for its own sake, with increased life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Park et al. 2004). Plus, many of us simply enjoy inquiry, and we derive feelings of satisfaction from discovering answers to questions, even when those answers are otherwise pointless. The value of that satisfaction is easy to confuse with the value of truth.

So let us suppose we benefit from caring about truth for its own sake. We benefit from having the sorts of attitudes one has who finds some pointless truths worth pursuing, and who thinks of total omniscience as importantly better than the alternatives. Then it should come as no surprise that we think of these as the right sorts of attitudes to employ in governing our cognitive lives—regardless of whether truth actually is intrinsically valuable. Even if truth is not intrinsically valuable, the right evaluative stance to take toward truth seems to involve valuing it to some extent for its own sake. Our intuitions about basic research and total omniscience are explicable as consequences of the fact that we benefit from having the attitudes those intuitions reflect, even if truth is not intrinsically valuable.

*2. Value Autonomization and Evaluative Conditioning*

The intuitions are also explicable as natural results of psychological processes that would operate regardless of truth’s intrinsic value. One of them is the process of “value autonomization” conjectured by Alvin Goldman and Erik Olsson. It is the process whereby “a type of state that *initially* has merely (type-) instrumental value eventually acquires *independent*, or *autonomous* value status” (Goldman and Olsson 2009, p. 33). We come to treat types of state whose value derives from their tendency to produce independently valuable states *as if* the former were valuable in themselves, even if their value is in fact derivative. Goldman and Olsson offer the case of morally good motives as an example:

Consider the relationship between (morally) good actions and good motives. The primary locus of moral value, quite plausibly, is actions, for example, acts of duty fulfillment or acts of altruism. Actions, however, are not the only things regarded as morally good or valuable. We also value good motives, for example, a desire to help others in need or a desire to do one’s duty. Why do we value such motives? A straightforward explanation is that such motives regularly bring about corresponding actions, actions which themselves are valuable. It is therefore plausible that there is a pattern of inheritance by which value passes from certain types of actions to corresponding motive types, which regularly produce those actions. Notice that a token motive of an appropriate type is regarded as good or valuable even if it fails to produce a good action. For example, a token motive may not generate any action, because there are conflicting considerations that yield indecision. Or it might produce an action that doesn’t really assist the intended party, or isn’t really what duty requires. Despite failing to produce good consequences of a standard sort, the token motive is still good or valuable, presumably because such value is inherited from the type of which it is a token. And this value it retains autonomously, even without triggering an independently good action. (p. 33)

It is important to emphasize that what Goldman and Olsson mean by “value” in the above passage is *ascribed* value. Value autonomization is not a process whereby something whose value had been extrinsic acquires intrinsic value. Rather, it is a process whereby something whose value is originally derivative comes to be *treated as* valuable independently or for its own sake. That is, it is a process whereby we acquire intuitions as if something were intrinsically valuable, whose value is originally derivative or extrinsic.

Goldman and Olsson think value autonomization can help to explain why we tend to think even justified false beliefs are good in some way, and why we tend to think of knowledge as better than justified true belief. They think these intuitions are explicable even though truth is the real locus of cognitive intrinsic value, and the value of justification is derivative from the value of truth.

Their line of thought can be extended further, though. Suppose true belief is not intrinsically or independently valuable either. Instead, there is a reliable correlation between acting on true beliefs and accomplishing one’s aims.[[17]](#endnote-17) Then a process of value autonomization could readily lead us to develop the habit of treating true beliefs as valuable even when they do not lead to practical success, and of treating practical success consequent upon acting on true beliefs as better than practical success that arises from error or ignorance. We come to ascribe intrinsic, or independent value to truth, but that ascription is not a response to truth’s actually being intrinsically valuable. Rather, it is a response to the reliable correlation between true belief and something else of independent value.

Goldman and Olsson do not offer direct evidence for the existence of value autonomization. They offer it as a plausible conjecture. Its plausibility is fairly strong, though. Apart from philosophical examples about good motives, justified belief, or true belief, it is not difficult to think up examples of bureaucrats or other people who come to think of something useful but intrinsically neutral as an end in itself (e.g., the timely completion of TPS reports). John Stuart Mill (1979, pp. 35-7) gives a similar explanation for why people value virtue, wealth and power for their own sakes, even though happiness (according to Mill) is the only intrinsic good.

Though Goldman and Olsson do not cite it, there is psychological evidence of a process very similar to what they describe as value autonomization. It is the classical conditioning of attitudes,[[18]](#endnote-18) which is also called “evaluative conditioning.” When a neutral stimulus is routinely or saliently paired with a stimulus subjects like, they can come to have a similarly positive attitude toward the neutral stimulus, even when it occurs in the absence of the original stimulus they liked. The possibility of evaluative conditioning provides a rationale for advertisers to display products accompanied by images that are independently pleasant (De Houwer et al. 2001; Olson et al. 2001). If states of one kind reliably and saliently accompany another, independently valuable type of state, then the stage is set for positive attitudes toward the former kind of state to arise through evaluative conditioning.[[19]](#endnote-19) This conditioning is plausibly the engine that drives value autonomization.

There is a plausible, but conjectural, conditioning story to be told about why we have the intuitions that some pointless truths are worth pursuing and that total omniscience is better than the alternatives. We are subject to a self-serving attribution bias, which inclines us to credit our successes to our skill and true belief, rather than situational factors, but to blame our failures on situational factors rather than our own incompetence or error.[[20]](#endnote-20) This means true belief is salient when we succeed, and not when we fail. And if true belief is saliently associated with the accomplishment of our ends (i.e., of our getting what we want), the stage is set for positive attitudes toward truth to arise by classical conditioning—even when what is at issue are pointless truths. Even if truth has no intrinsic value, it is no surprise that we find ourselves caring about it for its own sake, given the ways our psychological mechanisms actually work.

*3. Truth as an Internal Goal of Belief*

Belief, we are sometimes told, aims at truth. According to some philosophers, this is part of the very concept of belief. The concept of belief is the concept of a state whose job is to represent the world accurately.[[21]](#endnote-21) On such a view, the concept of belief is like the concept of a mousetrap. The defining feature of a mousetrap is that it is for catching mice, and the defining feature of belief is that it is for representing the world accurately.

Suppose such a view is correct. It is part of the very concept of belief that, in forming and managing our beliefs, we aim to construct an accurate and complete representation of the world. If that is so, then the self-conscious perspective of a believer has that goal built into it. To take up that perspective and consider oneself as a believer is, in part, to take on the construction of an accurate and complete representation of the world as a normatively significant goal. The question of whether such a representation has any intrinsic value simply does not arise, because adopting the perspective includes adopting the goal. Compare the case of playing chess. To adopt the self-conscious perspective of a chess player, one must take on the goal of checkmating the opponent’s king. Otherwise, one might be doing something that looks a lot like chess, but one is not *playing chess.* Checkmate is not intrinsically good, but it seems intrinsically good while one is playing chess, because it is the defining goal of the activity. Even if truth is not intrinsically valuable, it would seem intrinsically valuable from within the self-conscious perspective of a believer, because the truth goal helps to define what belief is in the first place.

If this view of belief’s nature is correct, then we have ready explanations for our intellectualist intuitions. A totally omniscient being achieves the defining goals of belief completely, while a practically omniscient being falls short. Furthermore, as Kvanvig is right to point out, some seemingly pointless true beliefs would increase the informational content of our set of beliefs more than the others. There is a greater informational gain in measuring the universe’s rate of expansion, for example, than in applying the rule of disjunction introduction to beliefs I already hold. Plausibly, increases in informational content are increases in the completeness of our worldview. We should thus expect some pointless truths to seem more worth pursuing than others, from within the self-conscious perspective of a believer. It is not that truth is intrinsically valuable, but rather that it is an internal goal of belief and, as such, it will necessarily *appear* intrinsically valuable from the self-conscious perspective of a believer, just as checkmate appears intrinsically valuable from the self-conscious perspective of a chess player.

We thus have several possible explanations of our intellectualist intuitions, even if truth is not intrinsically valuable. The intuitions might arise because we care about truth for its own sake, and caring about truth for its own sake is good for us. The intuitions could be products of evaluative conditioning. Or, we may be bound to treat truth as intrinsically valuable whenever we self-consciously consider ourselves as believers, because truth is a defining goal of belief, just as checkmate is a defining goal of chess that we are bound to treat as intrinsically valuable from the perspective of a chess player.

These alternative explanations cast doubt on the idea that the best explanation of our intuitions is that truth really is good for its own sake. A case for truth’s intrinsic value that rests on intellectualist intuitions needs to do more than just point out that we have those intuitions. It needs to show that we wouldn’t have those intuitions if truth were intrinsically neutral. That is a task that, to my knowledge, has not been discharged.

**IX. Conclusion**

If truth is intrinsically valuable at all, its value is minimal. There are no other intrinsic goods worse than truth. Furthermore, no amount of genuinely pointless truth is so valuable that one would be mistaken not to sacrifice other goods for it. The best explanation of these things, I have claimed, is that truth is intrinsically neutral in value.

We do have some intuitions that appear to count against that explanation. We intuitively rate a totally omniscient being as better off than a practically omniscient one, and we intuitively find some pointless truths worth pursuing despite their pointlessness. A possible explanation of those intuitions is that they are responses to truth’s intrinsic value, but there is good reason to think we would have them even if truth were intrinsically neutral. That undermines the abductive inference from our having the intellectualist intuitions to the conclusion that truth is intrinsically valuable.

I have not argued that this means we should not care about truth for its own sake, or that we should lessen the degree to which we do. That would require a further premise to the effect that we should not care about something for its own sake unless it is intrinsically valuable (or, perhaps, unless one believes it is). Such a premise would require additional argument, and I am hesitant to endorse it in any case. The attitude of caring about truth for its own sake is a motivational state, which inclines us to a certain amount of pure curiosity and a certain degree of vigilance against even harmless errors in our beliefs. Those attitudes could be good for us, or even inevitable for us, even if truth is not intrinsically valuable. If it is appropriate to care about truth for its own sake, it would appear to be appropriate for reasons other than truth’s intrinsic value.[[22]](#endnote-22)

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**Notes**

1. See Brady (2009), Kvanvig (2008), and Lynch (2004), for example. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Among the other varieties of non-instrumental value are final value, contributory value, and telic value, for example. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Chen and Ravallion (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There are those who think it is pointless or impossible to debate whether truth (or much anything else) is intrinsically valuable (e.g., Stich 1990; Lynch 2004). As Stuart Rachels (2003) has argued, though, this view is incorrect. Rachels identifies nine different kinds of arguments that can be given for or against the claim that something is intrinsically valuable. The arguments in this paper would fall under Rachels’ categories of arguing from the etiology of belief, arguing from intuition, and arguing from the attitudes of competent judges. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Whether it is appropriate to care about truth for its own sake may depend, partly, on whether it is ever appropriate to care about something for its own sake that lacks intrinsic value (or that one believes to lack it). I think it can be, but I am sure others disagree. In any case, it is a substantive philosophical issue that, unfortunately, I cannot pursue in this space. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Kvanvig is not perfectly consistent in his descriptions of pointlessness. Sometimes, he writes as though a truth is pointless whenever the overall value of believing it is nil (2008, p. 204). That would occur when disvalue from considerations other than truth exactly counterbalances whatever value there is in the belief’s truth. Sometimes, he writes as though truths are pointless when their value, considering everything relevant *other than* truth, is nil. Such true beliefs have no value apart from whatever value truth gives them (p. 205). And sometimes he writes as though truths are pointless when their overall value is nil *because* their lack of any other value undermines whatever value they might derive from being true (p. 208). Kvanvig might entertain these different forms of pointlessness in the service of trying to figure out whether any true beliefs really deserve to be called pointless at all. For my purposes, though, it is the second notion of pointlessness that matters: A truth is pointless when the overall value of believing it is neutral, apart from whatever difference is made by the belief’s truth. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Strictly speaking, the notion of pointlessness should be relativized to persons at least, and perhaps also to times. For ease of exposition, I don’t repeat the relativization in the rest of this paper, and I take it as understood. The examples of pointless truths given here are things I take to be pointless for just about everyone, though it is of course possible for there to be someone for whom they are not pointless at all. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kvanvig (2008, p. 210) contends that knowing all the important truths requires knowing which truths are important and which are pointless, and thus knowing all the pointless truths as well. It is not clear that that is correct. Suppose *p* is a pointless truth. A being who knows all the important truths (without pointless conjuncts), and knows that they are all the important truths (without pointless conjuncts), would not have to know that *p* is a pointless truth. Instead, she could just know that the question *whether p* has a pointless answer. That is, she could know that *either p is a pointless truth or ~p is a pointless truth*. To know which truths are important and which are pointless, one does not need to know the pointless truths themselves, but only that certain questions have pointless answers. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Kvanvig suggests that there are theological reasons to think of omniscience as part of the cognitive ideal. However, we should tread carefully. The fact that God is supposed to be omniscient (in some traditions) does not explain *why* omniscience is part of the ideal. Rather, the direction of explanation seems to go the other way. God is often supposed to be omniscient because omniscience is part of our cognitive ideal, and God is supposed to realize all perfections. That shows we value truth, but it does not necessarily entail that truth really is intrinsically valuable. Still, one might take the fact that so many of us value truth for its own sake as evidence that truth really is intrinsically valuable. Section VIII of this paper addresses that concern: It is likely we would care about truth for its own sake even if it were not intrinsically valuable, so our caring about truth for its own sake is not very good evidence that it really is intrinsically valuable. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. An anonymous referee points out that it may be infelicitous to talk about “learning” a pointless truth when it costs nothing — including no effort or time — to acquire it. Strictly, then, we should think of the “cost-free” acquisition of a pointless true belief as involving effort whose *net* value is neutral. We can imagine that there is some cost in learning the pointless truth, but that cost is exactly counterbalanced by pleasant feelings someone experiences during inquiry, for example. It will be important to keep in mind that the counterbalancing here is *exact*, so that on balance the thinker is no better or worse off after learning the pointless truth than before, other than whatever difference is made by the belief’s truth. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, not everyone thinks pleasure and beauty are intrinsically good. Those who do not should substitute other things they *do* think are intrinsically good in the example. The point is that, for intrinsic goods other than truth, we can generally find prices we ought to be willing to pay for them. But for truth, we cannot. This indicates that truth is not as valuable as other intrinsic goods. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This line of thought is similar to Berit Brogaard’s “trivial argument for epistemic value pluralism” (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This is similar to the thought behind Goldman and Olsson’s (2009) appeal to “value autonomization” in response to the problem of explaining the value of knowledge over mere true belief. Value autonomization is discussed further in the penultimate section of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Another explanation, which I will not pursue here, is that each additional pointless true belief adds *less* value than those that came before it. Then adding more pointless true beliefs would increase overall value, but it would do so asymptotically. I am comfortable disregarding this option because it is out of the spirit of the idea of *intrinsic* value. If something is intrinsically good, its goodness should depend entirely on its own characteristics, not its relationships to anything else. The intrinsic goodness of the truth of one belief, then, should not depend on how many *other* true beliefs one has. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Another intuition in this neighborhood, which Justin Fisher mentioned to me in conversation, is that one is mistaken to prefer a 99% chance of gaining a pointless true belief at no cost to a 100% chance of gaining a pointless true belief at no cost. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Not all basic research pursues pointless truths, but some very likely does. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. One might even suppose that truth is instrumentally valuable with respect to all our ends, whatever they might be. That is a stronger claim, but its added strength does no work in the present context. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. In psychology, “attitudes” are states of liking, disliking, valuing, or disvaluing. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See also Richard Brandt (1979, pp. 91 ff; 1996, pp. 27–8) for discussions of classical conditioning as a source of desires, likes, and dislikes. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Like much in social psychology, self-serving bias has been the subject of some debate, principally over whether it is best seen as a *cognitive* bias or a *motivational* bias. See Duval and Silvia (2002) for a recent discussion, and Glovich (1991) for a somewhat older one. In the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, Miles Hewstone describes the self-serving bias as “one of the most pervasive biases in social cognition” (1996, p. 75). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Here are just a few recent examples of views along these lines. David Velleman (2000) contends that belief has truth as a constitutive goal. Nishi Shah (2003) disagrees, but nevertheless contends that the concept of belief is the concept of a state governed by the prescription to believe only what is true. Allen Coates (2009) argues that it is part of the nature of belief that true beliefs are good (as beliefs), and false beliefs are bad. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a symposium, “Truth: The Worst of All Goods,” at the 2011 meeting of the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division. I am grateful to Maria Baghramian and Lindsay Craig for their very helpful comments. I also thank Robert Barnard, Seth Bordner, Justin Fisher, Michael Lynch, Stuart Rachels, and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)