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True Belief Is Not Instrumentally Valuable
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1 Introduction

Truth is presumably worth caring about: the goal of believing what is true and not what is false is a goal worth having. But what makes it worth having? Philosophers often say that part of what makes truth worth caring about is its instrumental value, though they debate whether truth has additional, non-instrumental value as well. In my view, the consensus that truth is instrumentally valuable is mistaken. Truth is not instrumentally valuable, at least not in the way philosophers standardly assume.

The argument to be offered here applies an insight due to Stich (1990), who pointed out that truth is only one member of a very large family of truth-like semantic properties. He argued that we would be better off with beliefs that have some of those properties than we would be with beliefs that are true. So, Stich concluded, having true beliefs is not the best way to pursue our ends, and truth’s instrumental value is considerably less than we usually suppose (1990: ch. 5). Stich’s argument has persuaded few philosophers, and—in my view—its premises do not lend much support to its conclusion. Nevertheless, Stich’s observation that there are alternative truth-like semantic properties is important, and it grounds my own, different argument against the instrumental value of truth.

For properties to be instrumentally valuable, they must be causally relevant to the accomplishment of good ends. To a first approximation, this is because being instrumentally good is being good as a means to an end, and being a means to an end (rather than, say, a reliable symptom of a means) requires playing a causal role in bringing the end about. I argue that other members of the family of truth-like properties screen truth off from the sort of causal relevance it needs in order to be instrumentally valuable: when we act on true beliefs and get what we want, the truth of the beliefs is not causally relevant to our success. Consequently, truth is not instrumentally valuable.
In §2, I outline some considerations about instrumental value, with the upshot that a property’s instrumental value with respect to a given end depends on its potential causal relevance to the accomplishment of that end. In §3, I present what has become the standard argument for truth’s instrumental value. Although I think the argument fails, it also sheds light on the particular way in which philosophers tend to suppose truth is instrumentally valuable: The truth of a means/end belief is supposedly instrumentally valuable with respect to the end it specifies, and the truth of other beliefs is instrumentally valuable in virtue of their roles as potential premises from which we might infer true means/end beliefs. In §4, I discuss Stich’s unsuccessful argument against truth’s instrumental value, but §5 applies Stich’s key insight to show that truth is not causally relevant in the way the standard argument for its instrumental value requires. Thus, I argue, truth is not instrumentally valuable after all. In §6, I respond to some likely objections.

A note on terminology: When I use expressions such as ‘the value of truth’, ‘the instrumental value of truth’, ‘the value of true belief’, and ‘the instrumental value of true belief’, I mean only the value of truth as a property of beliefs. I do not mean the value of truth as a property of utterances or propositions, nor do I mean the value true beliefs might have in virtue of possessing some property other than truth. It is also worth pointing out the important distinction between the claim I endorse, that truth is not an instrumentally valuable property of beliefs, and a claim I do not endorse, that true beliefs are not often instrumentally valuable. I think many (maybe even most) instrumentally valuable beliefs are true, but I deny that their truth is what makes them instrumentally valuable.

2 Instrumental value and causal relevance

To be instrumentally valuable is to be valuable ‘as a means’ to some other, valuable end. The core idea of instrumental value is thus relative. What is instrumentally good for driving nails might be instrumentally bad for fluffing pillows.

Relative to a given end, something’s instrumental value depends on how good a means it is for accomplishing that end. Part of what makes something a good means to an end is the efficiency and reliability with which it is capable of bringing the end about. Efficient and reliable means are better than the inefficient and unreliable means.

The bearers of instrumental value might be actions, objects, or properties. It is easy to think of actions as ‘means’ to ends; they are the things we do in order to get what we want. The above description of instrumental value readily applies to actions. Actions are instrumentally better with respect to an end the more efficiently and reliably they bring that end about. We can