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No Virtuous Insulation: A Dilemma for Veritism

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the idea of a virtue-first approach to the question of what has fundamental epistemic value. It has been suggested that a virtue-first approach is needed to strengthen the view known as veritism, according to which only truth has fundamental epistemic value. I distinguish between an ontological and a methodological virtue-first approach, and suggest that only the latter is an attractive option for a veritist. I then argue that the methodological virtue-first approach is incompatible with the idea that the epistemic domain is insulated, in the sense that being of epistemic value does not entail being of value. But insulationism is arguably an important tool for veritists in meeting various objections to their view, aside from being considered generally attractive by many. Veritists thus face a dilemma that requires them to give up one of two arguably attractive tools in their kit: either the virtue-first motivation of their view, or the insulationist conception of epistemic value.

Keywords: Epistemic value; insulationism; intellectual virtue; veritism; virtue epistemology

1. Introduction

Following a similar trend in moral philosophy, epistemologists have during the last 25 years or so devoted more and more work to questions concerning *virtue*. They study the general nature of intellectual virtue, the profiles of specific virtues, the role of virtues in enquiry, and the prospects for understanding other epistemologically interesting concepts in terms of them. Virtue epistemology is intimately connected with the 'value turn' in epistemology, according to which questions of norms, evaluation, and value occupy centre stage in our theorising. Recently, it has been proposed, in particular by Duncan Pritchard (e.g. 2014, 2021*a*, 2021*b*, 2021*d*), that we should approach questions in epistemic axiology – i.e. questions about the nature and shape of the evaluative epistemic domain – on a virtue-first basis. More precisely, he suggests that a virtue-first approach to epistemic value will render a position known as *veritism* – the view that only truth has fundamental epistemic value – more attractive.

In this paper, I will interrogate such a virtue-first approach to epistemic value and argue that employing it will require veritists to give up another popular assumption

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about the epistemic normative domain, namely that it is *insulated*: facts about what is epistemically good and bad do not depend on or have implications for what is *really* good and bad, or good/bad *simpliciter*. I will first clarify what a virtue-first approach may consist in, since this remains unclear in the existing literature. I then distinguish between an ontological and a methodological reading, and point out that the ontological reading, aside from facing familiar objections from a parallel discussion in ethics, is incompatible with an assumption that arguably lies in the background of many veritist views: that the epistemic domain is *value-based*. Hence, the methodological reading seems preferable. But, I go on to argue, the methodological reading is incompatible with insulationism about epistemic value.

The upshot of this is that veritists face a dilemma that requires them to give up one of two tools that seem important to making their position out as attractive: either give up the allegedly promising virtue-first way of motivating veritism, or give up insulationism about epistemic value. This is an interesting result, because veritists often reach for insulationist assumptions in defending their view against various objections. Moreover, a more general consequence of what I argue here is that the virtue-first approach cannot be used to support *any* view about fundamental epistemic value within a framework according to which the domain of the epistemic is both insulated and value-based. That is an interesting finding about the space of possible positions one might hold in theorising about epistemic value and epistemic normativity.

2. The epistemic domain

The locus of the debate, to which this paper is a contribution, is the domain of epistemic evaluation and normativity. This is the domain where we find evaluations of individual beliefs, belief-sets, methods, agents, traits, and so on as *epistemically* good or bad, *epistemically* right or wrong, *epistemically* justified or unjustified, and where we find considerations of what one should believe or ought to do, epistemically speaking. A common assumption is that normative domains are structured in the sense that most of the normative properties can be explained in terms of some smaller set of basic normative properties. Think of the moral domain. According to some theorists, the most fundamental thing in that domain is some rule or norm, and other normative properties such as virtuousness and goodness are explained in terms of this, e.g. it is good to φ because φ-ing is in accordance with a rule that no one could reasonably reject. According to other theorists, the most fundamental thing in that domain is goodness, and other normative properties such as moral rightness and moral virtuousness are explained in terms of goodness, e.g. it is morally right to φ because φ-ing stands in some appropriate relation to goodness. The latter is a *value-based* conception of the moral domain. In the epistemic domain, the corresponding view takes epistemic value to be explanatorily prior to other epistemic normative properties, so that e.g. *S*'s belief that *p* is justified because it (has some property that) stands in some appropriate relation to epistemic goodness. To conceive of the epistemic domain as value-based is common in the contemporary debate on epistemic normativity.[1]

[1]A number of big figures in epistemology arguably adopt this view (e.g. Alston 1993; BonJour 1985: 7–8; Foley 1987; Goldman 1986), and Sosa (2007: chapter 4) adheres to it, as do most of the defenders of veritism referred to in the next footnote, including Pritchard (although Hazlett (2013: 137–38) claims neutrality but phrases his discussion in value-based terms due to the popularity of the position). The view is popular with epistemic consequentialists, a movement that has been strong in recent years (see e.g. Pedersen 2020;

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The most central debate in contemporary epistemic axiology concerns the question of what has fundamental epistemic value. The idea here is that while lots of things are epistemically good, only a select few have *fundamental* epistemic value. The task of whatever is postulated at the level of fundamental epistemic value is to explain this rich array of epistemic goodness, in the sense that all epistemic goodness on the non-fundamental level must be derived from the goodness at the fundamental level. Monists think there is only one good on the fundamental level, whereas pluralists concede that there are at least two distinct fundamental epistemic goods. The arguably most common view in epistemic axiology is veritistic monism, or veritism for short, according to which only truth (or more generally, accuracy) has fundamental epistemic value.[2] Veritists are committed to explaining the epistemic goodness of rationality, knowledge, understanding, curiosity, coherence, and whatever else we rightly consider epistemically valuable in terms of the value of truth. Differently put, according to veritists, all epistemically good things derive their epistemic value from the value of truth, through some relation or other. Given a value-based conception of the epistemic domain – which veritists endorse – truth is the most fundamental explainer in the domain of epistemic normativity.

Whatever one takes to be basic in the epistemic domain, there are at least two different ways to conceive of it. I will focus here on epistemic value, and on veritism in particular, but both positions could be occupied by those who hold different views. Consider the veritist claim:

V: Fundamentally, only truth is epistemically valuable.

Such a claim admits of an attributive and a predicative reading. As Ridge (2013) points out, we can use Geach's (1956) distinction between attributive and predicative uses of 'good' in order to distinguish these two views on epistemic value. The general idea here is that modifying adjectives can be used in different ways, and this is relevant for what a locution involving said modifying adjectives entail. For instance, compare '*x* is a grey elephant' and '*x* is a small elephant'. The former locution entails that *x* is both an elephant and grey. This is an example of a predicative use of the modifier 'grey'. The latter locution, in contrast, does not entail that *x* is small. That's an example of an attributive use of the modifier 'small'. Ridge extends Geach's distinction to locutions of the form 'is F-ly G', which count as predicative just in case they entail 'is G', and attributive if not. For instance, 'is brightly coloured' entails 'is coloured', but 'is superficially reasonable' does not entail 'is reasonable'.

Now, we can read 'epistemically' in a claim like **V** so that it entails that truth has genuine value, or so that it entails no such thing. Theorists who are inclined towards the first, predicative reading, may be so because they think of epistemic value as a *sui generis* subcategory of value *simpliciter* – much like how many think of moral and/or eudaimonic value. But it can also be because they think that epistemic value is necessarily connected to some kind of genuine value. For instance, some think that epistemic goods are constitutively valuable in virtue of being a necessary part of the good life, which has eudaimonic value (see e.g. Lynch 2004 for an argument to

Pettigrew 2016 and several contributions in Ahlström-Vij and Dunn 2018). However, non-consequentialists too can have a value-based view of the epistemic domain, as Sylvan (2020) shows.

[2]Some explicit defenders of veritism include Ahlström-Vij (2013); Ahlström-Vij and Grimm (2013); Engel (2017); Goldman and Olsson (2009); Hazlett (2013); Pettigrew (2016); Pritchard (2014); and Sylvan (2018).

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this effect). Of course, on this kind of view, theorising about epistemic axiology, including defending a position like veritism, requires engaging with the ways in which epistemic value interacts with and relates to non-epistemic value.

This is in contrast to how theorists who prefer the second, attributive reading of 'epistemically' conceive of questions about epistemic value. Such theorists endorse what I call *insulationism* about epistemic value. We may say that they think of epistemic value as merely *formal* value. That term is not widely used, but the corresponding notion of formal normativity (in contrast to robust or genuine or categorical normativity) is familiar from metaethics and metanormativity debates more generally (e.g. Baker 2017; Finlay 2019; Maguire and Woods 2020; Wodak 2019). It is, of course, open to these veritists to argue that truth also has genuine value. But notably, this will not be in virtue of it having epistemic value.

The view that epistemic value is merely formal value has become increasingly popular in recent years.[3] The perhaps most influential proponent of this approach is Ernest Sosa, who memorably wrote that

> We humans are zestfully judgemental across the gamut of our experience: in art, literature, science, politics, sports, food, wine, and even coffee; and so on, across many other domains. (2007: 70)

He suggests that each of these are examples of normative domains, and each of them have some kind of internal structure along the lines suggested in the first paragraph of this section: they involve norms and values, some fundamental and the rest derivative. In value-based domains, there will be some fundamental, domain-specific good(s), in relation to which things are evaluated from the perspective of the domain. To illustrate, consider espionage. The fundamental good around which evaluations in that domain is centred is plausibly clandestine collection of confidential information. It is as derivative relative to this that the goodness or rightness, *from the point of view of espionage*, of anything else in the domain – spies, operations, organisations, agent handling practices, norms for how to behave when one is under cover – is to be understood. The espionage domain is a plausible example of an insulated domain: its existence and the evaluative and normative practices within it leave open whether clandestine collection of confidential information has any value *simpliciter*, and hence also whether anything that derives its espionage value through a relation to such information collection has 'any real value' (Sosa 2007: 73). Differently put, that x is good from the espionage point of view does not entail that x is good, and espionage value is only formal value.

A popular way (not the only one, although it is arguably Sosa's way) to flesh out the insulationist idea is to think of epistemic value as having a teleological structure: a spying operation is good insofar as it fulfils the function of a spying operation, i.e. collects intelligence without detection. We may then say that it has 'spy value', but from that we can't conclude anything about what other value it might have, including nothing about its real value (if there is such a thing). Similarly, a belief (or reasoning procedure) is good to the extent that it fulfils whatever function that a belief (or a reasoning procedure) is supposed to have, i.e. being true (or e.g. being truth conducive) – if we are veritists. Spying operations, beliefs, and reasoning procedures, like archers and assassins, are

[3]In addition to Sosa, quoted above, explicit adherents to this view include Hazlett (2013: chapter 9), Pritchard (2014), Sylvan (2018: 385; 420), Cowie (2019), Kelp (2021: chapter 5), DePaul (2001: 176–77), and Aschliman (2020).

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good to the extent that they perform well relative to achieving their formal ends. But it remains an open question whether those formal ends have value *simpliciter*.

Several prominent veritists are insulationists in the above sense (Hazlett 2013; Pritchard 2010, 2014; Sylvan 2018, 2020), and hence read **V** as not informing us about whether or not truth has any real value. Pritchard, for instance, writes that on his view, **V** is 'entirely consistent with arguing that the general value of truth is merely instrumental (or indeed, that it has no value at all)' (2014: 113).[4]

3. A virtue-first approach?

A value-based, veritist approach to the epistemic domain is commonplace. Many would arguably agree that if there is a default, or at least a majority view, such veritism is it – indeed, it has often been assumed to be correct without further argument, following from the definition of 'the epistemic' (cf. David 2001; Engel 2017; Pritchard 2014: 112). That said, the tenability of veritism has been one of the main topics of discussion in recent debate over epistemic value. Although it has many prominent defenders, it has also come under fire from epistemic value *pluralists* who argue that truth cannot be the only fundamental epistemic good (DePaul 2001; Gardiner 2012; Kelp 2021; Madison 2014; Pedersen 2017, 2020; Ranalli 2021) and from other epistemic value *monists* who argue that the sole fundamental epistemic good is not truth but something else, such as knowledge (Aschliman 2020; Millar 2011) or evidential support (Bjelde 2021).

Veritists attempt to defend themselves from these attacks in various ways. One particular kind of defence proceeds from the complaint that veritism has been construed in the wrong way by its critics (and sometimes by its proponents), and that the most challenging objections can be met once we construe the position differently. The virtue-first approach, recently proposed by Pritchard (2021*a*, 2021*b*, 2021*c*, 2021*d*) is an example of that strategy.[5] The suggestion at issue here is that we should approach questions in epistemic axiology on a virtue-first basis. In particular, Pritchard claims that such an approach is the key to rendering veritism truly attractive.

The core idea is that we should 'take the notion of an intellectual virtue as primary, and then understand claims about epistemic value in terms of this notion' (Pritchard 2021*b*: 5522) (see also 2021*d*: 1354). It is not entirely clear what questions the virtue-first approach is supposed to help us answer, but one key question that we obviously want an answer to – and to which veritism is one proposed answer – is: what has fundamental epistemic value? I am going to assume for the sake of argument that the virtue-first approach is supposed to help us answer this question.

It is clear that Pritchard thinks the virtue-first approach is *also* supposed to elucidate the veritist position, i.e. tell us what it means to say that truth has fundamental epistemic value: 'rather than trying to determine what is involved in treating the truth as a fundamental good in the abstract (…) we should instead let it be determined by considering what an intellectually virtuous inquirer values' (2022: 12). Indeed, this is crucial to his argument for the claim that veritism is in fact not vulnerable to certain classical objections.[6] There

[4]See also Pritchard (2010: 12).

[5]Kurt Sylvan's rejection of instrumentalism about epistemic value derivation (2018) and consequentialism about epistemic rightness (2020) is another example of this broad strategy for defending veritism.

[6]This includes the trivial truths objection; for references and useful discussion, see Treanor (2014); for the swamping problem, see Kvanvig (2003) and Zagzebski (1996), for a useful overview of that big debate, see Pritchard *et al.* (2022); and for the aim of enquiry objection, see Elgin (2017) and Millar (2011).

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is the possibility that such elucidation of the veritist position is *all* the virtue-first approach is supposed to do for us, i.e. that it is not supposed to also offer a direct argument for veritism. This would make the approach less interesting and powerful, as it would require us to assume from the outset that veritism is true – an increasingly controversial assumption. I will return to this fallback position towards the end of the paper, but my focus is on the idea that a virtue-first approach to epistemic value is supposed to help resolve the question of what has fundamental epistemic value in favour of veritism.

3.1. Neo-Aristotelian intellectual virtues

Let us now pin down the relevant notion of an intellectual virtue. Some epistemologists use the term 'intellectual virtue' to refer to both so-called faculty virtues (reliable cognitive capacities such as good memory or sharp eyesight) and to virtuous *traits* (such as open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual conscientiousness). In the context of a virtue-first approach to epistemic value (Pritchard 2021*b*: 5522–23, 2021*d*: 1354), only the latter counts as intellectual virtues. This is a broadly neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue.[7] According to it, virtues are skill-like traits: they are (typically) reliable cognitive capacities with an essential motivational component, and they must be *acquired* and *maintained* over time, by emulation of other virtuous individuals and reflection on one's own performance. Intellectual virtues so conceived are connected to epistemic goods, or values, in two distinct ways. First, intellectual virtues are *instrumentally* connected to epistemic goods: they are efficient means to bring about, sustain, or promote epistemic goods.[8] For a veritist, this amounts to being a means to truth. Second and crucially, intellectual virtues are connected to epistemic goods by way of their motivational component. As Baehr puts it, 'intellectual character virtues are partly constituted by certain admirable and distinctively intellectual motives' (2011: 30). In particular, this consists in a positive orientation in mind and disposition towards epistemic goods for their own sake. The virtue literature often refers to this as 'loving' what is good for its own sake (e.g. Hurka 2001; Zagzebski 1996), and the underlying idea is that things that are good for their own sake[9] deserve or demand to be recognised as such, and it is a mark of the virtuous to recognise what *is* good for its own sake and to properly appreciate it as such. Loving, or (more colloquially) being committed to, some good *g* for its own sake can take many forms including but not limited to appreciating, taking pleasure in, promoting, preserving, prizing, respecting, celebrating, and pursuing *g* (Nozick 1981: 429–30; Swanton 2003; Sylvan 2018). It is this latter connection between the characteristic motivational profile of intellectual virtue and epistemic goods that the virtue-first approach to epistemic value seeks to exploit. On one way of looking at things, we learn about what traits are genuine virtues by considering whether they involve the right motivational relation to epistemic goods. But the idea behind the virtue-first approach to epistemic value is that this gets things somehow backwards. We should not *first* try to determine what the epistemic good(s) are and *then* figure out which traits really are intellectual virtues, in virtue of relating appropriately to those good(s), but rather somehow take virtue as 'primary'.

[7]This approach is sometimes also called 'virtue responsibilism' (and contrasted with 'virtue reliabilism'), following Axtell (1997).

[8]Not all neo-Aristotelian virtue epistemologists *require* virtues to be instrumentally valuable, but it is common to assume that they, as a matter of fact, typically *are*.

[9]'For its own sake' is here intended to mean 'finally' rather than 'intrinsically', where the former but not the latter allows being non-instrumentally valuable in virtue of relational (non-intrinsic) properties.

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3.2. Value from virtue – two interpretations

Inspired by the remarks that Pritchard makes, here is an argument for veritism that proceeds from the nature of intellectual virtue:

Value from Virtue

P1: The fundamental epistemic goods are those things that an intellectually virtuous enquirer is characteristically committed to for their own sake.

P2: An intellectually virtuous individual is characteristically committed to truth for its own sake.

Conclusion: Truth is a fundamental epistemic good.

There are two quite different ways to read value from virtue, and more generally (at least) two different ways of taking virtue to be primary with respect to epistemic value. I will consider each in turn, but let me first say a few words about the argument. First, the astute reader will note that conclusion is not sufficient to establish **V**, according to which truth is *the only* fundamental epistemic good. But this is true also of other ways to motivate veritism. All sides of the debate tend to assume that monism about fundamental epistemic value is preferable to pluralism, all else equal, for reasons of parsimony. Arguments for the monist part of veritism thus tend to be separate defences against the allegation that truth cannot be only fundamental epistemic good (Sjölin Wirling forthcoming). Second, a comment on the premises. P1 is an expression of the close connection between epistemic value and intellectual virtue, on the neo-Aristotelian picture: the latter partly consist in a positive orientation towards the former, for its own sake. P2 is a substantial claim that one may reasonably reject even within neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, e.g. Baehr (2011: 101, footnote 22) explicitly leaves open the question of just what the epistemic goods are and how they relate to each other. But quite a few neo-Aristotelian virtue epistemologists assume, just as Pritchard apparently does (2021*b*: 5523), that what we find when we reflect on the nature of intellectual virtue is that the characteristic motivation it involves is always, at bottom, a commitment to truth. For instance, Montmarquet takes the primary intellectual virtue (which then needs to be regulated by other virtues, in order to achieve overall intellectual virtuousness) to be essentially constituted by a motivation to 'arrive at the truth and to avoid error' (1992: 21). Zagzebski's exact view on this is not easy to pin down, but although she lists knowledge and understanding as epistemic goods that intellectual virtues are directed at, she seems to suggest that a motivation towards these are, at the end of the day, expressions of a more fundamental intellectually virtuous motivation: a love of 'cognitive contact with reality' (Zagzebski 1996: 168). Exactly what *that* means is open for discussion[10] but suffice it to say that many have interpreted this as truth, or more generally, accuracy.

Now, on the first reading of value from virtue, P1 is making an ontological priority claim where things are said to be of fundamental epistemic value *because* they are what the virtuous enquirer is motivationally oriented towards for their own sake. Differently put, the proposal here is that we should understand (fundamental) epistemic value in terms of intellectual virtue. One characteristic of virtue epistemologies is that they regard 'agents rather than beliefs [as] the primary objects of epistemic evaluation'

[10]E.g. Ranalli (2021) argues that cognitive contact with reality is distinct from accuracy and argues for epistemic value pluralism on that basis.

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(Battaly 2008: 640) (see also Turri *et al.* 2021). This characteristic can take different expressions, but often normative epistemic concepts are analysed or explained in terms of virtue or virtuous agents. For instance, virtue-based theories of knowledge will explain what it is for a belief to qualify as knowledge in terms of intellectual virtue (e.g. Greco 2010; Sosa 1991; Zagzebski 1996). The idea now is that we do something similar for epistemic value, so that what it is for something to be of fundamental epistemic value is for it to be loved for its own sake by intellectually virtuous agents (*qua* intellectually virtuous agents). If it is right, as P2 states, that intellectually virtuous agents characteristically love truth for its own sake, it falls out that truth has fundamental epistemic value.

The ontological version of value from virtue involves conceiving of intellectual virtuousness as a more fundamental normative property than epistemic goodness, and therefore it is a non-starter for the great majority of veritists, who take the epistemic domain to be value-based. Is a virtue-based approach even *compatible* veritism? I suppose one could in principle take truth to be the fundamental epistemic good, while holding that epistemic goodness is not at the properly fundamental level of the epistemic domain. Ultimately then, the whole epistemic domain is not to be explained in terms of the value of truth, but in terms of intellectual virtue, which essentially involves a motivation for truth. While this combination of views may be conceptually possible, attempts to explain normative notions like rightness and value in terms of virtue faces objections familiar from the debate over virtue ethics in moral philosophy (Copp and Sobel 2004: 547, 522; Driver 2006: 118; Svensson 2011: 326–30; Svensson and Johansson 2018). Therefore, epistemologists should arguably take a page from that debate and steer clear of this option anyway. Basically, virtue-based conceptions put the cart before the horse. Consider the Euthyphro dilemma: Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods? A similar question is facing us here: Is truth (or knowledge, or understanding) loved by the intellectually virtuous because it is epistemically good, or is it epistemically good because it is loved by the intellectually virtuous? The latter answer just seems to get the order of explanation wrong. If truth wasn't epistemically valuable, love of truth would not be commendable, and so not the mark of an intellectually virtuous individual. Virtuous individuals are persons who respond correctly to the good and the bad (cf. Adams 2006; Hurka 2001) – their doing so is part of what makes them virtuous.

In the following, I will focus on what I take to be the more promising reading of value from virtue. On this interpretation, P1 is not a claim about ontological priority but about epistemic priority. That is, virtue is primary in the sense that it, by being somehow more easily or immediately accessible to us, is our epistemic entry point to theorising about epistemic value. Let us call this the methodological reading. On this view, we should look to the intellectually virtuous to find out what has epistemic value. If an intellectually virtuous agent *S* values *g* (e.g. true beliefs), that's reason for us to think that *g* has epistemic value (of the kind and to the degree that the *S* values *g*). The connection between intellectual virtue and epistemic value is exploited in the sense that reflection on what the intellectually virtuous individual values will enlighten us on what it epistemically good. This is compatible with the epistemic domain being value-based, so I take the methodological interpretation of value from virtue to be more attractive to a veritist. In the next section, however, I will argue that there is no way for an insulationist about epistemic value to employ value from virtue in order to get to a conclusion about fundamental epistemic value.

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4. Intellectual virtue: insulated or not?

A question which presents itself in relation to value from virtue is whether we are to read 'intellectual virtue' as an *insulationist* normative notion or not. That is, are we supposed to take claims like '*S* behaves intellectually virtuously' and '*T* is an intellectual virtue' to licence conclusions like '*S* behaves genuinely virtuously' and '*T* is a real, genuine virtue', or do such inferences require independent argument? I will explore both options here and argue that neither will make value from virtue into an argument for veritism in the insulationist sense.

Let's first consider value from virtue under a predicative reading of 'intellectual virtue', where intellectual virtues really are genuine virtues. This is how neo-Aristotelian virtue epistemologists tend to understand intellectual virtue, as relevant to being a good person (Baehr 2011) or leading a good life (Zagzebski 1996).[11] One may of course question why this particular evaluative epistemic concept should receive a different treatment from e.g. epistemic goodness or epistemic rightness, if one is otherwise an insulationist, but I will set that issue aside here because there is a more pressing problem with methodological value from virtue on this reading. The problem, basically, is that P1 now equivocates between formal and real normative notions. Properly spelled out, P1 on this reading states:

> The *insulated* fundamental epistemic goods are those things that an intellectually virtuous – *in the non-insulated sense* – enquirer is characteristically committed to for their own sake.

This reading of P1 is not supported by the neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue, which connects virtue with genuine, not merely formal, value. Moreover, by the insulationists' own lights, P1 is false on this reading: one cannot draw conclusions about what has epistemic value in the insulated sense from truths about what has genuine value.

Let me briefly explicate this. First, it is true that intellectual virtues in the genuine sense are intentionally directed at what is good in itself, on the neo-Aristotelian picture. Moreover, virtue theorists in the neo-Aristotelian tradition often distinguish between epistemic and moral virtues on the basis of their intentional objects (Baehr 2011; Wilson 2017; Zagzebski 1996). That is, intellectual virtues are traits that are intentionally directed in the appropriate way towards specifically *epistemic* goods for their own sake. This seems initially promising for the current approach: if we can identify the *intellectually* virtuous, we can get at the *epistemic* good(s) by examining what they are finally motivated by. But of course, 'epistemic goods' in this sense are a subset of the genuine, real goods. These may or may not coincide with what is epistemically good in a formal, insulated sense, but that they do is not part of the neo-Aristotelian conception of intellectual virtue.

Second, insulationism about epistemic value explicitly denies an automatic connection between epistemic value and genuine value. And this insulationism works in two directions. As we have already seen, it does not follow that *x* has genuine value from the fact that *x* has epistemic value. But neither does it follow that *x* has epistemic value from the fact that is an epistemic kind of thing that has some genuine value (Pritchard 2017: 1482). Let's consider a toy example to illustrate this. A research method is arguably an epistemic kind of thing, insofar as that kind of classification makes sense. If this particular research method – which we may stipulate is very unlikely to generate any true

[11]Interestingly, in some of Pritchard's writings (e.g. 2016, 2022) he appears to regard intellectual virtue in this way despite his commitment to insulationism about epistemic value.

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beliefs and fails to respect various norms of rationality – nevertheless makes someone very happy, and let's assume that pleasure is genuinely valuable in itself. This entails that the research method has real (if derivative) value. But it does not follow that the method has *epistemic* value, in the insulationist sense. And the same reasoning applies to the intentional objects of intellectual virtues. Genuine virtue, viz. intellectual virtue on the predicative reading, is motivationally directed at things that are good in themselves and that are furthermore 'intellectual' or 'epistemic' in nature rather than, say, moral. But even if the intentional objects of intellectual virtues are both valuable and in the category of things and properties we call 'epistemic', it does not follow that they are epistemic goods in the insulationist sense. In short, insulationism blocks precisely the kind of inference from intellectual virtue in the non-insulated sense to conclusions about epistemic value in the insulated sense, that P1 on this reading suggests.

What about the other option? Reading intellectual virtue as insulated in the same sense as epistemically good, justified, and so on, would seem to be the most natural thing for an insulationist to do. But it is doubtful whether insulated virtues can generally realise the motivations-involving, neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue. And if they cannot, examining them cannot tell us about what has fundamental epistemic value.

Intellectual virtue in the insulated sense does not, without further argument, contribute to someone's being a good person or leading a good life. What might this then amount to? A plausible gloss might be in terms of being an excellent enquirer (or believer, perhaps). Chess is a favourite analogy that insulationists reach for when they want to illustrate their view, so let's start with the idea of an excellent chess player. Presumably, an excellent chess player is someone who is really good at chess, which involves regularly and reliably succeeding in reaching or approximating the constitutive aim of the activity, i.e. someone who tends to checkmate (or get close to doing so) her opponents when she plays. Indeed, checkmating one's opponent is said to be the fundamental good of the domain of chess evaluation. We might want to qualify this in certain ways, e.g. her winning cannot be the result of cheating or unbelievable luck – it must somehow be attributable to her skill as a player. Now, being an excellent chess player in this sense is arguably quite irrelevant to whether one is a good person in a moral or prudential sense – it neither adds nor detracts from it. Or at least we cannot say that it does without further argument, and our idea of what a good chess player is, is independent of any such arguments.

With this domain-specific, insulated sense of agential excellence in hand we can construct an analogous notion of 'insulated' intellectual virtue, in terms of the excellent enquirer: someone who, when she enquires, regularly succeeds in realising the constitutive aim of that activity, i.e. she ends up believing the truth. Moreover, this is not the result of a cosmic coincidence but attributable to her inquisitive skills and she enquires in line with generally approved epistemic norms. It is not wholly implausible that this could be irrelevant to whether or not she is a good person, morally or prudentially. She is just really good at enquiring. For the veritist, this means that she typically succeeds in getting (close) to the truth when she attempts to form beliefs.

I have nothing against this artificial conception of domain-specific virtue as such, but I doubt that it can support an argument like value from virtue. Consider the following two cases.

Cynical Chess

Carrie Kasparov has won the chess world championship title more times than any other living player and she is the human with the ELO that comes closest to that of

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the world's best chess computer, Stockfish. But in the last five or so years, Carrie has become much less interested in chess than in the fame and admiration that comes with her position, and this now stands out to her as most important in life. She does not admire other great chess players for their performance, she does not feel proper pride or take any pleasure in her own achievements in the field as such. Yet, she goes on playing and she goes on winning at the same rate and level as before and maintains her record-setting ELO scores. She would never cheat as she realises this would entirely ruin her reputation and take away all that she loves, and while she really does not care about the game or about checkmating her opponents for its own sake, she realises that to keep doing this is the only way to sustain what she truly does care about.

Award-winning Astrophysics
Alison Zweistein is an astrophysicist, recognised across her discipline as one of the world's most prominent. During the course of her career so far, she has done ground-breaking work, based on creative, novel ideas and thorough testing, that has led to an entirely new and very fruitful methodology that is gaining popularity among her colleagues. Alison is well-respected and known for the many long hours she puts in at the lab together with her assistants and in front of her calculations, but those who know her personally are well aware that Alison is not really interested in her research results as such. Instead she is driven by a determined childhood dream of one day enjoying the ultimate glory and long-lasting admiration associated with being awarded the Nobel Prize, and she realises that the only way of realising this aim is to conduct top-tier research that lives up to the norms of the scientific society and stands up to careful scrutiny by her peers.[12]

I propose that Alison is an excellent enquirer, and that Carrie is an excellent chess player. To deny this seems preposterous: they are both widely recognised as world-leading at what they are doing. Insofar as we can construct an insulationist notion of virtue built around domain-specific excellence, they are both virtuous in the insulated epistemic and chess sense, respectively.

If the virtue-first approach is on the right track, we should be able to study Carrie and Alison in order to find out what the fundamental goods of their respective domains are. In particular, we should look into what the final aims of their enquiries and chess activities are. But note that, while there is a sense in which Carrie is committed to checkmating her opponents and Alison is committed to epistemic goods, they are not committed to these things for their own sake. Carrie is committed to checkmating her opponents as a means to a non-chess-related end. Similarly, Alison does not care about the important truths of astrophysics for their own sake – she is committed to truth in her enquiries as a crucial means to academic glory and admiration. The upshot is that even if we do have an ability to identify domain-specifically virtuous individuals independently of knowing what the aims of the domains they are excellent with respect to are, we cannot hope to learn about the fundamental goods of these domains by looking at what these agents are motivationally oriented towards for its own sake.

I expect some will want to push back here, saying that while Alison and Carrie are excellent at what they do, they are not really *virtuous* even in the domain-specific sense. To really be intellectually (or chess) virtuous, one really does need to love epistemic

[12]For discussion of similar cases, see e.g. Roberts and Wood (2007), Battaly (2014), and Crerar (2021).

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goods (or checkmating one's opponent) for their own sake, and one's excellency really must arise from that motivational orientation. But what motivates the insistence that virtue really requires the right motivation? I agree that we might well feel the pull to resist calling Alison and Carrie virtuous despite their excellence at what they do, but I also submit that the most plausible source of this pull is our idea of genuine virtue, i.e. the kind of traits relevant to being a good person or living a good life. We might want to say that a virtuous chess player should also have certain attitudes, e.g. respect others' chess-related achievements, feel proper pride at their own chess-related accomplishments, and fostering a sense of fair play in younger players. And we might want to require corresponding things of a truly virtuous enquirer. But are we then not thinking about how a genuinely virtuous person would behave in chess-related or enquiry-related circumstances, rather than about a domain-specific sense of virtue? Recall that the domain-specific notion of virtue is, by insulationism, supposed to be completely orthogonal – without further argument, at least – to whether one is a good person or leads a good life. But if someone behaves in these ways with respect to chess or enquiry that *does* arguably contribute to their moral and/or eudaimonic status without further argument. It might not be enough on its own to make them good people or constitute *eudaimonia*, and it may be overridden by how they feel and behave more generally, but it is hardly irrelevant. Unlike the 'pure', viz. insulated, excellence which Carrie and Alison both possess.

A different way to make the same point is to consider versions of Award-Winning Astrophysics and Cynical Chess where Carrie and Alison are ultimately committed to non-epistemic things that have more plausibility as candidate *simpliciter* goods (which one may well doubt that fame, fortune, and academic glory are), such as pleasure or achievement. Let's assume that Alison is motivated by her wish to take pride in true achievement and reconstruct the case accordingly. We may now be more inclined to consider her virtuous, but this does not help the insulationist. It is still not the case that we can find out about the fundamental epistemic good(s) from enquiring into what she values for its own sake. While the prospective final value *simpliciter* of an agent's ultimate ends might be relevant to whether or not she is virtuous in a non-insulated sense, the very point of insulationism is to not commit to any claims about what is valuable *simpliciter*, so it should not matter to questions of insulated intellectual virtue. What we need in order to vindicate P2 is not that an epistemic good like truth is valuable for its own sake, but that an excellent enquirer *qua* excellent enquirer is motivationally oriented towards truth for its own sake. But the cases show that they need not be.

What cases like Award-Winning Astrophysics show is that, as some epistemologists of a pragmatist bent are fond of pointing out, the ends of well-conducted enquiry are often non-epistemic, and their epistemic end-results (truth, knowledge) are valued only instrumentally or constitutively to those ends (Crerar 2021; Hookway 2003; Olson 2012). In a sense, this observation is friendly to insulationism: the very point of it is that we are supposed to be able to judge things as good or bad in the epistemic domain without taking a stance on what is good or bad outside of that domain. People can have all sorts of bad ends and personal traits, and still be good at enquiring (or chess). But the other side of the coin is that this also seems to make the ultimate motivations of enquirers irrelevant to what is good or bad in the epistemic domain. Hence the observation is *unfriendly* to the idea, underlying the virtue-first approach to epistemic value, that we can find out about what is of epistemic value by considering what the intellectually virtuous – in the insulated sense of being an excellent enquirer – value for its own sake.

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The upshot is that there is no way for an insulationist about epistemic value to employ the methodological value from virtue argument. Either the notion of virtue in question is insulated, in which case virtue does not necessarily involve a commitment to any epistemic goods for their own sake. But then we cannot look to what the intellectually virtuous (*qua* excellent enquirers) value for its own sake, in order to find out what is epistemically valuable. Or the notion of virtue is not insulated, in which case it does necessarily involve a proper commitment to things that are in some sense epistemic and good for their own sake, but not to epistemic goods in the insulated sense.

I want to end by considering what I earlier referred to as a fallback position. As we have seen, some philosophers think that things which are good in themselves can demand different kinds of responses: it may be proper to seek to maximise and bring about some goods, but other goods rather demand e.g. preservation or respect. Studying how the virtuous treat epistemic goods will teach us how those goods ought to be treated as the goods they are. Pritchard clearly thinks that the virtue-first approach will do this for us (i.e. teach us about the right way to value truth) but the fallback position is that this is *all* it does. Since it turned out that a stronger virtue-first approach is incompatible with insulationism, what about this weaker view?

In fact, I think the reasoning above applies here too. First, if we study how intellectually virtuous people in the non-insulated sense treat e.g. truth, it is not obvious that this teaches us anything about what it means for truth to be epistemically valuable in the *insulated* sense.[13] Second, if we instead study excellent enquirers, viz. intellectually virtuous agents in the insulated sense, it is not clear that we will find that they treat truth in any particularly unified way. To be sure, they will all be disposed to enquire in ways that are *conducive* to getting to truth, but this says nothing about what they respect, desire, praise, take joy in, celebrate, foster in others, love, prize, and so on, nor why they are disposed to enquire in those ways. As noted above, many different motivational profiles seem compatible with being an excellent enquirer in the insulated sense.

5. Conclusion

Let's take stock. After some stage-setting, I distinguished between an ontological and a methodological reading of the virtue-first priority claim. The ontological reading is incompatible with a value-based conception of the epistemic domain, and so with standard veritism. The methodological reading thus seems clearly preferable, but it turns out – or so I argued – that it is incompatible with insulationism about epistemic value. One upshot of this is that the virtue-first approach cannot be used to support any view (veritistic or not) about fundamental epistemic value within a framework according to which the epistemic domain is both insulated and value-based: on the ontological reading it conflicts with the latter, and on the methodological reading with the former.

The veritists in particular now face a dilemma. They can give up on insulationism about epistemic value. But it is notable that insulationism is often assumed to make

[13]Moreover, although I don't have space to argue for that here, it seems to me that how an intellectually virtuous person treats truth is not only a consequence of her intellectual virtuousness but also of her other character traits. That is, the reason we consider her virtuous in the intellectual domain is partly a consequence of how she balances epistemic concerns with other concerns. So even if we could transfer proper virtuous treatment of truth into the insulated epistemic domain, it might seem to go against the grain of insulationism that what it means for truth to be epistemically valuable is after all not an insulated matter.

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easier the lives of philosophers who want to theorise about epistemic value, and perhaps especially so for veritists. For instance, veritists routinely explain away what seems to be problematic cases, such as when some truth seems to lack value (e.g. Wrenn 2017), or when false beliefs are to be preferred to true beliefs (Hazlett 2013), by pointing out that true beliefs may still have (greater) *epistemic* value in this sense that implies nothing about other kinds of value. Similarly, one veritist strategy in face of the swamping problem is to explain away remaining intuitions about knowledge's surplus value compared to true belief as perhaps tracking genuine value but not epistemic value in that insulated sense (e.g. Ahlström-Vij 2013). More generally, what emerges from the discussion in this paper is that insofar as the tenability of veritism (or any other view of epistemic value) depends on an appeal to normative concepts (such as that of intellectual virtue in the final motivations-involving sense) that are not available in an insulationist domain, there is a sense in which insulationism makes the lives of veritists, and perhaps also other theorists, harder.[14] Alternatively, they can give up on the virtue-first approach to epistemic value. But if Pritchard is right, that would also be to forego a highly attractive way of motivating and defending veritism. In short, both insulationism and the virtue-first methodology are allegedly potentially important tools in the veritists' toolkit. They cannot, however, have both.[15]

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[14]In Sjölin Wirling (2022), I argue that the same lesson emerges from a closer look at Sylvan's (2018) related attempt to defend veritism by coupling it with the idea that fitting ways of valuing truth has final yet derivative epistemic value.

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