The Telos and the Skopos of the Intellectually Virtuous: Outline

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How is the Value of the Intellectual Virtues Related to the Value of Truth?

Existing Answers:
   Instrumentally:
      Virtues are those faculties and traits that are reliable in getting us to the truth.
   Motivationally:
      Virtues are those character traits which we develop out of a love of truth.
   Teleologically:
      Virtues are those character traits which that are aimed at truth.

A New Answer:
   Skopologically:
      The exercises of virtue aim at truth, but do not depend on reaching truth.
         An idea from Stoic moral theory.

Skopos and Telos: A Stoic Distinction

   Analogy with Medicine: A doctor practices the skill of medicine. Her goal in acting is to save the life of the patient. Her patient may die. But if he does, this does not undermine the fact that she is still a good doctor, and she was still exercising the skill of doctoring well in treating him. These facts depend on her performance, not on the outcomes.

      Doctor’s Skopos: To bring the patient back to health.
      Doctor’s Telos: To practice medicine well.

   In the Moral Sphere: The Stoics hold that virtue is the skill of living. Generosity will be one among many skills of living. Tania is a generous person; she practices the skill of living generously. She encounters a homeless man, and is moved by her generosity to help him by offering to take him to the local homeless shelter. He may refuse to take any assistance from her. But if he does, this does not undermine the fact that Tania is a generous person, or the fact that she was exercising her virtue of generosity in this particular instance. These facts depend on her performance, not on the outcomes.

      Tania’s Skopos: To help the homeless man.
      Tania’s Telos: To practice generosity.
         As part of her overall Telos to live well

   In the Intellectual Sphere: Apply the Stoic moral picture to the realm of belief. Intellectual carefulness will be one among many intellectual virtues. Sabina is an intellectually careful person. She encounters a puzzling question in ecology, and she is moved by her
intellectual carefulness to seek the true answer to this question. She consults an expert in ecology (after checking that he is, in fact, an expert) and asks him the answer to her question. The ecologist may lie to her. As a result Sabina comes to a false belief. But this does not undermine the fact that Sabina is an intellectually curious person, or the fact that she was exercising her virtue of intellectual carefulness in this particular instance. These facts depend on her performance, not on the truth of her belief.

Sabina’s Skopos: To believe the truth about her ecological question.
Sabina’s Telos: To practice intellectual carefulness.
As part of her overall Telos to live (and think) well

Results for Intellectual Virtues:

**Intellectual Virtues will not Require Reliability:** We can fail to reach our skopos in individual acts and still have virtues. This is true not just in isolated cases, but in general. Perhaps I am prevented from ever reaching the truth about a particular claim or in a particular area. Still I retain my intellectual virtues, and those virtues are no less valuable for being unreliable in achieving the skopoi I set myself. Intellectual virtues are complete in themselves and do not require any particular outcomes to bolster their value.

**Intellectual Virtues will Retain an Important Role for Truth:** The intellectually virtuous person regularly sets truth as the skopos of her various beliefs. The intellectually virtuous person cares about the truth, and rationally acts so as to get the truth. The intellectually virtuous person will also adapt her behavior when she learns that her beliefs are false. (In the same way that the doctor might try another medical technique or the generous person might try another way to help.)

**Intellectual Virtues will be Distinct from Moral Virtues:** The exercises of the intellectual virtues will be unified in having similar skopoi. They will all aim at true beliefs, each about a particular subject and reached in a particular way. Thus the exercises of the intellectual virtues will all aim at true beliefs. This will distinguish the intellectual virtues from the moral virtues, the exercise of which will be aimed at particular moral actions (or attitudes).

Solutions to Problems for Intellectual Virtues:

**Skeptical Worries:** The Stoics’ moral theory is perfectly suited to address these worries, as it is motivated by the concern that our actions might not be enough to bring about our desired outcomes. Thus Stoics limit their virtues to what is “up to us”. This is parallel to the concern that all our epistemic work might not be enough to get us to the truth. By limiting intellectual virtue to what is “up to us” we can sidestep radical skeptical worries. Even if we cannot reach the truth, we can still be intellectually virtuous.

**Simple Perceptual Beliefs:** Virtue epistemology is sometimes accused of over-intellectualizing beliefs, and, as a result, not being able to accommodate simple perceptual beliefs e.g. that there is a red apple on the table. The belief is so direct there seems to be no role for intellectual virtues to play. The Stoic picture of moral development can help here, because it leaves a large role for those things that are natural for us. When we start out as
children, we choose those things that are naturally appealing to us – food, warmth, etc. As we mature, our reason moderates those choices. Still we will often choose those things that are natural for us. But it is the sensitivity to reason that makes my adult choices virtuous. I reach for the bread basket without much thought. But if there is not enough bread for everyone at the table, I will moderate my reaching. Similarly for beliefs. Upon seeing a red apple, I will come to believe that there is a red apple without much thought. But if I know that there is a red light in this room, I will moderate my belief. Thus my reaching for bread is virtuous because it is constrained by reason. And similarly my belief that this is a red apple is also virtuous because constrained by reason.

Some Possible Radical Results:

Value Monism: Traditionally value monism in epistemology is the position that the only epistemic value is the value of truth; all other values are derivative from that value. The Stoic model would give a different kind of value monism. The Stoic moral theory is well-known for holding that only the practice of virtue has any real value; the other things in life may be rationally preferred (preferred indifferents), but are not of true value. Applied to the case of intellectual virtues, this would mean that only the exercise of our intellectual virtues has real value. Truth is to be preferred to falsehood; it is a preferred indifferent. But getting the truth does not increase the value of the intellectual virtue. It will still be natural for humans to prefer reaching the truth and to act in ways aimed at reaching the truth. (This claim depends on whether we take values to be only incommensurable, or instead accept that the value of one always outweighs the other.)

Actions are Beliefs: Virtue Epistemology makes a parallel between belief and action; differences between belief and action make this parallel potentially problematic. But on (at least some interpretations of) the Stoic picture, this distinction disappears. Exercises of the virtue are the central cases of action; they are what is praised and blamed. But these actions cannot be characterized in terms of their outcomes, since the intended outcome may or may not occur. Therefore action must be characterized instead by a “mental assent to a proposition.” This will most often lead to action, and often to the intended outcomes, but not always. If I am suddenly paralyzed I will not act. If the world is not as I expect, or I am powerless I will not bring about the outcome. It is the mental assent that is essential. But belief is just mental assent to a proposition. So actions are a kind of belief. And virtues apply to both equally well.