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A defense of the veritist account of the goal of inquiry

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ABSTRACT
Veritists hold that the goal of inquiry is true belief, while justificationists contend that the goal of inquiry is justified belief. Recently, Christoph Kelp makes two new objections to both veritism and justificationism. Further, he claims that the two objections suggest that the goal of inquiry is knowledge. This paper defends a sophisticated version of veritism against Kelp's two objections.

Veritists (e.g. Goldman 1999; David 2013; Pritchard 2021) hold that the goal of inquiry is true belief, while justificationists (e.g. Kaplan 1985; Feldman 2000) contend that the goal of inquiry is justified belief. Recently, Kelp (2021) makes two new objections to both veritism and justificationism. Further, he claims that the two objections suggest that the goal of inquiry is knowledge.

This paper defends veritism against Kelp's two objections. Section 1 will contend that the first objection – the commitment argument – is based on a false premise, nor does it suggest that the goal of inquiry is knowledge. Section 2 will explain why the second objection – the progress argument – does not undermine a sophisticated version of veritism. Finally, I will close by showing how the sophisticated version of veritism can handle a classic objection to veritism.

1. The commitment argument

Before critically examining the commitment argument, a brief clarification of the argument is in order. It can be outlined as follows:

1. Commitment Release Principle: If, at t, one attains the aim of a given activity, then, at t, one is released from all commitments towards attaining this aim.
2. There are cases where one acquires a justified true belief in p, but one is not released from all commitments towards attaining the goal of inquiry into whether p.
3. Therefore, neither justified belief nor true belief is the goal of the inquiry.

Premise 1 or the Commitment Release Principle, at first glance, seems plausible. Imagine that you are a firefighter engaging in a certain firefighting. The goal of firefighting is to extinguish hazardous fires as well as to rescue people. If you extinguish the fires and rescue all the trapped people, then you are released from all commitments towards the goal of firefighting.

Kelp (2021, 14) provides the following Gettier-like case to illustrate Premise 2:

> **The Hire**: You are a geologist. I have hired you for two weeks to find out whether (D=) a certain mine that I am considering buying still has diamonds in it. Since I need to be in a remote location with no means of communication for the next two weeks, we agree to meet at the mine two weeks from now. You send your team of workers to the mine. After a day's work, they bring you a sample of a deposit of stones they found. You run all available tests on the sample of the stones, all of which suggest that the stones are indeed diamonds. On the basis of this evidence, you come to believe that D. Since there is still a considerable amount of time before our meeting, you and your team pack your bags and get on the next flight home to spend time with your families. Meanwhile, I return unexpectedly early from my trip to the breaking news that the seller has placed a deposit of fake stones in the mine that are so cleverly crafted as to be indistinguishable from real ones by currently available tests. What's more, I also learn that the fake stones were placed exactly where you found the deposit and that you have since left to see your family. You are currently back home with your family and entirely unaware of the news. The final twist in the story is that, unbeknownst to everyone, there actually is a deposit of real diamonds in a hidden corner of the mine.

In this case, you have a justified true belief that D. But it seems that you are not released from your contractual commitment to settle the question whether D. As Kelp (2021, 15) writes,

> To see this, put yourself in my shoes (i.e. in the shoes of your employer). I know that what you found wasn't a deposit of diamonds. While I might concede that

you have an excuse for no longer working in the mine, I could rightly insist that you go back to work and fulfill your contract.

Kelp suggests that the best explanation of why you are not released from your contractual commitment is that the goal of inquiry into whether p is to know that p (suppose that p is true).

In what follows, I will first argue that *given the Commitment Release Principle*, knowing that p is not the goal of inquiry into whether p, either. Then I will argue that the Commitment Release Principle is false.

If the Commitment Release Principle is true, then knowing that p is not the goal of inquiry into whether p, for there are cases where one acquires knowledge, but one is not released from all commitments towards attaining the goal of inquiry. Consider a variant of the Hire case:

> **The Hire 2.0**: Everything is the same with the Hire case, except for the following: What you found is a deposit of diamonds. The breaking news is fake. It is made up by the seller who no longer wants to sell the mine because he has found that there are a lot more diamonds in the mine than he expected. He hopes that no other people are interested in the mine so that he can peacefully get all the diamonds.

In this case, you know that D. After all, you have been unaware of the news, and the news is fake.[1] But it seems that you are still not released from your contractual commitment to settle the question whether D. It seems appropriate for me to forward the news to you and ask you to go back to work and fulfill your contract. It seems inappropriate for you to ignore my request and refuse to investigate further (even if you have good reason – e.g. immediately after I forward the news to you, a friend of the seller tells you that the news is fake – to doubt the news). Intuitively, you are supposed to go back to test samples of the stones from other places in the mine.

On closer inspection, the best explanation of why you are not released from your contractual commitment in both the Hire 2.0 and Kelp's original case seems to be that such contractual commitment release requires collecting adequate evidence *for the employer*. To be sure, the Hire case does not specify the content of the contract. But it is reasonable to assume that I employ you to investigate whether (D) the mine has diamonds in it

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[1]It is widely agreed that such misleading defeaters do not undermine knowledge. For a recent discussion, see de Almeida and Fett (2016). To be sure, some philosophers (e.g. Harman 1973, 143–144) suggest that misleading defeaters can undermine knowledge if the agent should have been aware of them – it would be epistemically irresponsible for the agent to be unaware of them. If they are right, we may tweak the Hire 2.0 case so that it would *not* be epistemically irresponsible for you to be unaware of the breaking news.

because I want you to help me form a true belief in D (or ~D). As I am a rational and shrewd businessman, the only way to make me believe that D (or ~D) is to show me adequate evidence (relative to my background information). Thus, the contract would require you to try your best to collect adequate evidence (for or against D) for me before the deadline. Now your testimony about the tests is evidence for D, but this evidence has been defeated by the breaking news I received. Thus, you have not yet collected adequate evidence for me to believe that D (or ~D), and there are 13 days left before the deadline. Hence, you should go back to work and fulfill your contract.[2]

However, one might defend Kelp by providing an alternative diagnosis of the Hire 2.0: You are under a contractual obligation to inquire further *only after* you learn about the breaking news. This is because when this misleading defeater kicks in, you no longer know that D. So long as you are unaware of the breaking news, you know that D (assuming that the misleading defeater doesn't undermine your knowledge), but you are also under no contractual obligation to inquire further.

I disagree with this diagnosis. When you are unaware of the breaking news and thus know that D, you are still under a contractual obligation to inquire further. This is because you work for me, not for yourself. As noted above, it is reasonable to assume that the contract requires you to try your best to provide adequate evidence for me to form a belief (regarding whether D) within the deadline. This is different from merely requiring you to report what you know to me. From the fact that you report what you know to me, it does not necessarily follow that your testimony is adequate evidence for me to form a belief. In the hire 2.0, your testimony that the tests your team run show that D is true is defeated by the breaking news. It is not adequate evidence for me to believe that D, as I am aware of the breaking news. Further, you have not tried your best to provide adequate evidence for me within the deadline: There are 13 days left, and your team may test the stones from other places in the mine. Even if you never learn about the breaking news, it would still be appropriate for me to ask you to inquire further and provide me more evidence. (NB. Even if there are no misleading defeaters, knowing that D may still not release you from your contractual commitment to settle the question whether D. Consider a variant of the Hire 2.0: You

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[2]If I ignored the news and firmly believed that D on the basis of your testimony, then you would be released from your contractual commitment. But if I doubted your testimony without good reasons, would you be released from your contractual commitment? This is a complicated issue that I will not discuss here.

know that D not via your team's reliable analysis of a sample of the stones, for your team never run any tests on any sample of the stones in the mine. Rather, you know that D via the testimony of a certain local. Then it seems perfectly appropriate for me to ask you inquire further and collect more evidence as long as there are a few days left before the deadline. After all, whether D is a very significant issue for me. Your testimony about a certain local's testimony is inadequate evidence for me to form a belief.)

If the above analysis is correct, then the commitment release principle is false. Specifically, it seems that the following three propositions can be all true: (i) S1 is employed by S2 to inquiry into whether p; (ii) S1 achieves the goal of inquiry into whether p; (iii) S1 has not yet provided S2 adequate evidence to believe that p (or ~p). Now if (i) and (iii), then S1 is not released from the contractual commitment (suppose there are a few days left before the deadline). Thus, it is possible that S1 achieves the goal of inquiry into whether p yet is not released from the contractual commitment.

By way of summary, the commitment argument is flawed because it rests on a false premise. Further, if the argument were good, it would suggest that knowing that p is not the goal of inquiry into whether p.

2. The progress argument

Another argument Kelp makes for the claim that neither justified belief nor true belief is the goal of inquiry runs as follows:

1. The Progress Thesis: If, at t2, one has not attained the aim of a given activity and if one makes progress towards attaining its aim between t1 and t2, then one has not attained its aim at t1, either.
2. There are cases where at t1, one acquires a justified true belief that p, but at t2, one has not attained the aim of inquiring into whether p, and one makes progress towards attaining its aim between t1 and t2.
3. Therefore, neither justified belief nor true belief is the goal of the inquiry.

To illustrate Premise 2, Kelp (2021, 16) provides the following Gettier-like case:

> **The Insight**: The local prison at which you are a warder has received a tip that an inmate is in possession of illegal drugs (henceforth 'is holding' for short). You are charged with finding out whether this is correct. The first inmate you

investigate has a history of drug dealing and abuse. You find a little bag of white powder under their bed. Moreover, upon questioning, the inmate credibly admits to being in possession of drugs. On the basis of this evidence, at t1, you come to believe that some inmate is indeed holding. At t2, however, you discover that the bag does actually not contain drugs and that the confession was false. Perhaps the inmate himself thought that someone else had planted drugs on him and was confessing to minimize the impending punishment. So, you go back and resume your inquiry. At the same time, some inmate is indeed holding. It is just that it isn't the one you investigated.

On Kelp's view, at t1, you have a justified true belief that some inmate is holding. Also, you make progress on your inquiry into whether some inmate is holding between t1 and t2. This is because, writes Kelp (2021, 16–17), 'first, at t2, you have discovered that a certain piece of evidence that, at t1, appears to support the target proposition is misleading. Second, at t2, you can tick one person off the list of suspects you were not able to tick off at t1'. In addition, Kelp thinks you have obviously not achieved the goal of inquiry at t2.

Again, Kelp suggests that the best explanation of why you make progress on your inquiry is that the goal of inquiry is knowledge: After all, at t1, your belief that some inmate is holding does not qualify as knowledge because it is Gettiered.

In what follows, I will argue that if the goal of inquiry into whether p is to know that p (or ~p), then you do *not* make progress on your inquiry into whether some inmate is holding between t1 and t2. Here is the outline of my argument:

i.   Given the knowledge goal, you make progress towards the aim of inquiring into whether p between t1 and t2 only if your epistemic standing at t2 is closer to knowing that p (or ~p) than your epistemic standing at t1.
ii. But your epistemic standing at t2 is not closer to knowing that some inmate is holding than your epistemic standing at t1.
iii. Therefore, given the knowledge goal, you do not make progress towards the aim of inquiring into whether some inmate is holding between t1 and t2.

Premise (i) is trivially true. To see Premise (ii), compare what you have at t1 and t2. At t1, you have the justified true belief that some inmate is holding. But at t2, you are unjustified in believing that some inmate is holding, for you realize that the old evidence is misleading and have no

reason to believe that some inmate is holding. Thus, it is unclear that you are, at t2, closer to knowing that some inmate is holding. To be sure, at t2, you can tick one inmate off the list of suspects you were not able to tick off at t1. But this fact does not make your epistemic standing closer to knowing that some inmate is holding. Indeed, if, at a later time, you can tick 70 inmates off the list of 100 suspects, you may well come to the false conclusion that *no* inmates are holding.

Given Premise (i) and (ii), it is difficult for Kelp to explain why you have made progress, between t1 and t2, on the inquiry into whether some inmate is holding. For on his account, the goal of this inquiry is to know whether some inmate is holding, but you are not closer to this goal at t2 than you are at t1.

By contrast, veritism can explain why you have made progress on your inquiry between t1 and t2. Specifically, according to veritism, inquiry aims at acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. While we may acquire a true belief without inquiring into any questions (as some beliefs are causally forced upon us[3]), inquiring into whether p often (if not always) involves at least implicitly inquiring into questions such as 'What evidence do we have regarding whether p? Is the evidence good enough?' This is because inquiring into whether p aims at *believing* the correct answer (i.e. believing p or believing ~p), and we often need evidence to make belief occur: We would not believe a proposition if we do not even implicitly believe that we have adequate evidence (e.g. in the Hire case, the employer does not believe that the mine has diamonds in it because he does not believe that there is adequate evidence). As Quine and Davidson say, beliefs do not occur in isolation.[4] In addition, we often need reasons to discard a belief: We tend to retain our beliefs as long as we do not believe that there is adequate evidence against them. Accordingly, inquiring into whether p not only aims at acquiring true belief in p and avoiding false belief in ~p (suppose that p is true). Oftentimes, it also involves aiming at acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs about the questions such as 'What evidence do we have regarding whether p? Is the evidence good enough?'.

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[3]For instance, even though you never intend to inquire into your boss' sex life, you may form some true beliefs about your boss' sex life because of your colleague's gossip.

[4]Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (2007, 196) provide a nice example:

> What would it be like to believe that there's milk in the refrigerator, and nothing else? It seems as impossible as having money without the social and economic circumstances that give sense to something being money. To believe that there is milk in the refrigerator, you have to have enough by way of belief to count as understanding what milk is, what a refrigerator is, and what it is for one thing to be inside another. It takes a lot of belief to be any amount of belief.

In the Insight case, inquiring into whether some inmate is holding clearly involves inquiring into the questions such as 'What evidence do we have regarding this question? Is the evidence good enough?' At t1, you have the true belief that some inmate is holding, but you come to believe this *because* you believe the false proposition that the little bag of white powder under the bed and the first inmate's confession are adequate evidence for your belief that some inmate is holding (though the belief about whether the evidence is adequate might be implicit[5]). At t2, you discard the false belief. To be sure, you may well discard the true belief that some inmate is holding (for it is the false belief that causes you to form this true belief at t1). But you also acquire a new significant true belief at t2: The little bag of white powder under the bed and the first inmate's confession are *not* evidence for your previous belief that some inmate is holding because the little bag does not actually contain drugs, and the first inmate's confession is false. Thus, overall, you make progress on your inquiry into whether some inmate is holding between t1 and t2.

If my proposal is correct, then the progress argument does not undermine the veritist idea that the goal of inquiry is to obtain truth and avoid error. Specifically, the veritist idea is open to two interpretations: (i) In every case, inquiry into whether p merely aims at acquiring true belief in p and avoiding false belief in ~p (suppose that p is true): It does not aim at acquiring any other true beliefs (and avoiding any other false beliefs). (ii) Inquiry into whether p often involves inquiry into the relevant questions and thereby aims at acquiring true belief not only in p but also in some other truths (and avoiding false belief not only in ~p but also in some other falsehoods). The progress argument at most shows that (i) is false. It poses no challenge to (ii).

However, one might raise the following objection to (ii). While inquiry into whether p often involves inquiry into the relevant questions, inquiry into the relevant questions is merely a means of achieving the goal of inquiry into whether p. Thus, the goal of inquiry into relevant questions is *not* constitutive of the goal of the inquiry into whether p. It follows that inquiry into whether p merely aims at acquiring true belief in p (suppose that p is true): It does not aim at believing true answers to

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[5]What is implicit belief? Philosophers such as Gareth Evans and Richard Moran think that belief is transparent in the sense that one can discover whether one believes that p simply by considering whether p. There might be some counterexamples to this principle, but it seems highly reliable. Thus, generally speaking, we implicitly believe that p if the belief that p is not occurrent, but we would assent to that p simply by considering whether p.

the relevant questions. Rather, believing true answers to the relevant questions is merely a means of forming a belief in p.

This objection does not bite, for inquiry into the relevant questions is not merely a means of achieving the goal of inquiry into whether p. The relevant questions are also worth investigating for their own sake, as believing true answers to such questions is of intrinsic epistemic value. Thus, when we cannot settle whether p without settling the relevant questions (that is, we must settle whether p and the relevant questions *together*), it is appropriate to evaluate inquiry into whether p and the relevant questions *as a whole*. Put differently, the question of whether p alone cannot be a proper object of inquiry. It is the question of whether p and the relevant questions as a whole that is a proper object of inquiry. In such cases, talking about 'the goal of inquiry into whether p' does not make much sense unless it means the goal of inquiry into whether p *and* the relevant questions. If a person ends up believing the true answer to the question of whether p but false answers to the relevant questions, we would say that she (partly) fails to achieve the goal of the inquiry.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, I have shown that Kelp's two objections to veritism and justificationism are flawed. The best explanation of the two cases Kelp offers (i.e. the Hire and the Insight) is not that the goal of inquiry is knowledge. Rather, I have suggested that veritism can be interpreted in a way that accommodates both the Hire and the Insight.

By closing, I'd like to suggest that this interpretation can handle a classic objection to veritism. Here is the classic objection: Suppose you inquire into whether p and come to believe the truth that p on the basis of wishful thinking. Then, intuitively, you fail to achieve the goal of inquiry. But veritism implies that you perfectly achieve the goal of inquiry because you acquire the true belief that p and avoid the false belief that ∼p. Thus, veritism is false.

On the interpretation of veritism I prefer, however, veritism does not imply that you perfectly achieve the goal of inquiry. This is because when you inquire into whether p, you also inquire into questions like 'What evidence do you have for p? Is it good enough?' and come to believe the false proposition that your wishful thinking is good evidence for p. Thus, you *partly* fail to achieve the goal of inquiry. To be sure, inquiring into whether p might not always require inquiring into questions like

'What evidence do you have for p? Is it good enough?' But it often does. This might explain why we have the intuition that one fails to achieve the goal of inquiring into whether p as long as one believes the truth that p on the basis of wishful thinking.

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