

The Epistemology of Practices and Truth Tracking

Joseph Carson
Department of Philosophy
Liberty University
Lynchburg, VA 24515

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Edward Martin

Abstract

In the wake of Edmund Gettier's sound argument against knowledge being justified true belief, how should philosophy reconstruct an epistemology that also takes into account postmodernism? Developments in contemporary epistemology have shown that particular, practical experiences might be integral for knowledge. Particularly, Robert Nozick, in his concept of truth-tracking (cf. "Knowledge and Scepticism," in *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology*), offers an epistemology in which direct connection to factual reality is a requirement for knowledge. Using counterfactual criteria, he claims that person S tracks the truth of proposition P when meeting these two conditions: (1) S would not believe P if P were false, and (2) S would believe P if P were true. These two subjunctive conditions require knowledge to be a close relation to truth. In addition, Nozick specifies that the method of belief causation is integral for his case. Significantly relevant to truth-tracking, Alasdair MacIntyre, an Aristotelian virtue ethicist, has developed the philosophy of practices, which is vital for his virtue ethics (cf. *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*), and his work can considerably develop Nozick's concept of truth-tracking. This paper's central thesis is that MacIntyre's theory of practices in historically extended traditions offers an explanation for how people track the truth; this, in turn, bolsters Nozick's epistemology of truth-tracking, as it describes the method through which people are factually related to reality, an area of analysis that Nozick overlooks. This essay's research methodology will consist of analysis in both Nozick and MacIntyre's works—showing how their concepts interlock and jointly strengthen each other. In addition, the research will conclude in showing how MacIntyre's philosophy of practices and awareness of postmodernity will powerfully complement Nozick's epistemology.

Keywords: epistemology, practices, truth-tracking

1. Introduction

While Aristotle considered knowledge (specifically, wisdom) non-practical and fully formed when divorced from particulars,¹ developments in contemporary epistemology have shown that particular, practical experiences might be integral for knowledge. Particularly, Robert Nozick, in his concept of truth-tracking, offers an epistemology in which direct connection to factual reality is a requirement for knowledge. Furthermore, Alasdair MacIntyre, himself being an Aristotelian virtue ethicist, has developed a philosophy of practices, which is integral to his virtue ethics and will significantly develop Nozick's concept of truth-tracking.² MacIntyre's philosophy of practices in historically extended traditions offers an explanation for how people track the truth; this, in turn, bolsters Nozick's epistemology of truth-tracking, as it shows how people are factually related to reality.³

2. Nozick and Truth-Tracking

Though he spends a significant portion of his argument writing against skepticism, Nozick's goal in proposing the truth-tracking theory is to show how people can have knowledge despite the possibility of skeptical hypotheses. Nozick writes, "Our task here is to explain how knowledge is possible, given what the sceptic says that we do accept [e.g., the possibility of being brains in a vat] In doing this, we need not convince the sceptic, and we may introduce explanatory hypotheses that he would reject."⁴ Instead of attempting to prove logical inconsistency in the skeptic's account, Nozick accepts the full weight of their case and formulates an epistemology that takes into account their argument. Two of Nozick's emphases are specifically relevant for the present argument: (1) his brief description of method (abbreviated as "M") as a process of tracking truth and (2) his emphasis on close, factual relation to truth being a requirement for knowledge. These two concepts will neatly connect to Alasdair MacIntyre's account of practices.

2.1 The Method of Truth Tracking

Very concisely, Nozick addresses the issue of method, or how a person arrives at the belief that *p*. Identifying a possible weakness in his own account, his main claim is that within a single analysis of knowledge, the analyzer must maintain a single method by which the believer comes to believe that *p*. Nozick explains how this faulty mixing of methods in an analysis might occur, writing,

Suppose some person who truly believes that *p* would or might arrive at a belief about it in some other close situation where it holds true, in a way or by a method different from the one he (actually) used in arriving at his belief that *p*, and so thereby come to believe that not-*p*. In that (close) situation, he would believe not-*p* even though still *p* holds true. Yet, all this does not show he actually doesn't know that *p*, for actually he has not used this alternative method in arriving at his belief.⁵

The significant point from Nozick's argument is this: only the *actual* method used for coming to believe that *p* is relevant for (2), (3), and (4) in his conditions for knowledge.⁶ The hypothetical situations are not hypotheticals relating to *other methods*; rather, they are hypotheticals relating to beliefs produced through a single (actual) method. If this were not specified, then Nozick's epistemology would fail, as any actual method that produces belief has a hypothetically related method producing a possible lack of truth-tracking. For example, a grandmother actually forms the belief that her grandson is healthy based on *M*₁ (i.e., sight), but she would form the same belief under *M*₂ (i.e., her family tells her that her grandson is healthy in order to prevent an anxiety attack, even though he is ill).⁷ While *M*₂ is a very real possibility, it cannot exchange *M*₁ during a single analysis of a person having knowledge (e.g., the grandmother *actually* knowing that her grandson is healthy). In this way, Nozick strongly emphasizes the process of belief formation, yet, his explanation for method is superficial. Furthermore, Nozick's idea of method is exactly where MacIntyre's philosophy of practice can strengthen truth-tracking epistemology.

2.2 Factual Relation to Truth

Not only does Nozick specify the idea of method, his epistemology also fundamentally works based on a person having close, factual relation to truth. Nozick explains, "Knowledge is a real factual relation, subjunctively specifiable, whose structure admits our standing in this relation, tracking, to *p* without standing in it to some *q* which we know *p* to entail."⁸ In this passage, Nozick denies the closure principle, as he argues that there is not necessarily doxastic equivalence between close possible worlds.⁹ The reason he rejects the closure principle is because he sees more epistemic certainty in actual relations to reality than closed doxastic equivalence between possible worlds, where *the actual relations in those worlds might be far different*.¹⁰ Here, connection to truth is the important emphasis. Regarding this point, MacIntyre's philosophy of traditions as embodied, historically extended arguments will support Nozick's concept of factual relation to truth.

3. MacIntyre and Practices

Central to MacIntyre's virtue ethics, practices and traditions explicate the process and context of virtue formation. While these concepts primarily deal with ethics, they also are relevant to epistemology. Specifically, MacIntyre's philosophy of practices will show *how* truth is tracked, a point that Nozick fails to explain explicitly, as he only shortly writes about method. In Nozickian terms, practices internal to traditions are the most common methods for belief formation.

3.1 Practices

In MacIntyre's historically minded account of virtue ethics, he argues that practices are (1) the means of acquiring goods, (2) the sites of virtue formation, and (3) the processes by which traditions are extended.¹¹ MacIntyre comprehensively defines practices, writing,

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systemically extended.¹²

In this definition and the subsequent explanation following it, the concepts of internal and external goods play a significant role in practices. On the one hand, internal goods are those goods that are only attainable by *virtuously* engaging in a certain practice.¹³ On the other hand, external goods are acquired not by any specific practice but are generally attainable through many various means.¹⁴ Furthermore, acquiring the internal goods to a practice takes virtue, even a measure of skill.¹⁵ Practices, when performed for internal goods, require an intuitive quality of fluency with the practice, which is habitually learned.¹⁶ These internal goods, highly relevant to the thesis of this paper, are the meaningful truths of a tradition—the factual connections to reality. Finally, practices are the means by which traditions continue through time, and they lie at the center of a tradition's truth.¹⁷ In these various ways, MacIntyre helpfully develops the concept of practices.

3.2 Traditions

The meta-picture of MacIntyre's account is the concept traditions, the accounts of life and meaning in which every person is enculturated. MacIntyre writes, "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations."¹⁸ Traditions are the contexts for life and the realm where practices are at work.¹⁹ In addition, every person engages in discourse *from* a tradition—there are no independent standards by which people can analyze from *outside* traditions.²⁰ The important point for the present inquiry is this: traditions are the houses of meaning (i.e., truth) in which people are connected to truth through practices. This feature of MacIntyre's account significantly explains the environment of truth-tracking.

4. Practices as Truth-Tracking

After recounting Nozick and MacIntyre's relevant claims, three intersecting points strengthen both accounts: (1) humans are embodied, rational animals who *are* their bodies, not separable from the grit of everyday life, (2) practices are the methods of truth tracking, where goods (i.e., types of truths) are dispensed, and (3) due to common grace, truth (in various measures) can be found at the center of many traditions. These three claims will bolster MacIntyre's viewpoint (i.e., by showing how it can have epistemic implications) and will further explain Nozick's epistemology (i.e., by explicating *how* truth is tracked). Thus, together, MacIntyre and Nozick offer a thorough epistemology of practices.

4.1 Embodiment

Rooting his account in Aristotle (who included humans in the category of animals), MacIntyre argues that human embodiment is an integral aspect of virtue formation; in turn, this will explain why truth-tracking is a natural component of being rational animals—creatures who are defined by their environment. After commenting on a passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, MacIntyre writes, “They [i.e., Aristotle’s commentators] have underestimated the importance of the fact that our bodies are animal bodies with the identity and continuities of animal bodies, and they have failed to recognize adequately that in this present life it is true of us that we do not merely have, but are our bodies.”²¹ Here, MacIntyre argues against the view of humanity as disembodied, which is an Enlightenment dream of neutrality. Rather, rationality and knowledge itself exists on the level of practical, societal, and communal life; indeed, human vulnerability as creatures is integral for practicing virtue formation.²² Human embodiment, then, shows how truth-tracking is actually natural—as practitioners in a tradition, people are not separable from present reality. James K.A. Smith, expanding on Bourdieu’s logic of practice, writes, “It is because I always already navigate the world by *habitus* that I can step back to deliberate and calculate. I ‘think about’ the world second; first I’m engaged in it as an actor whose motivations and ends are practical and largely ‘unconscious.’”²³ Accordingly, people, in some sense, have no choice but to be connected to reality (i.e., track truth), as that *is part of their embodied nature*. Implicit in Nozick and explicit in MacIntyre, people are their bodies, whose knowledge is always first a non-rational connection to the world.

4.2 Goods

Every tradition has goods internal to its practices, and these goods are (often) the truth that the practice tracks (as a Nozickian *method*). For example, the Christian practice of communion is a participation in the truth of God’s grace through Jesus’ sacrifice. Likewise, when two philosophers properly engage in a dialogue, they both receive the benefits of a cathartic, mind-stimulating education. Even further from Western thought, a Neo-Confucian practitioner engages in *li* (i.e., ritual) in order to attain (or track!) *ren* (i.e., human goodness, a balanced society).²⁴ In all three cases, the good central to the tradition is a kind of truth (or reality) that the practice tracks. In this way, goods are the “targets” of practices.

4.3 Relativism

Within this fusion of MacIntyre and Nozick, the objection of relativism can quickly seem pertinent—are all practices’ goods equally true? Theologians Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl might quickly argue that this possibly relativistic account would create “a world in which justice and fairness are meaningless concepts, in which there would be no accountability, no possibility of moral improvement, no moral discourse.”²⁵ Indeed, if arguing that Truth is not exclusive to one tradition and that knowledge is dependent on a person’s societally formed *habitus* is relativistic, then this argument does propose a kind of relativism for knowledge. Yet, it in no way denies that one Truth is objectively real. The internal goods of practices, according to this Nozickian and MacIntyrian account of knowledge, are aspects of reality shared by various traditions. Furthermore, God has used pagan religions to instruct His people in redemptive history; indeed, other religions can have typological revelation (i.e., deeper, imitative knowledge of God and Truth), not only general revelation.²⁶ And finally, James K.A. Smith explains the value for humans (as dependent, created beings) to accept a type of relativism that denies representationalist accounts of knowledge.²⁷ Thus, truth-tracking across traditions is a very real possibility.²⁸

5. Conclusion

While Nozick skillfully proposes the concept of truth-tracking, his account is significantly expanded by MacIntyre’s argument for practices in historically extended traditions; together, they form a thorough epistemology of truth-tracking *through* practices. Contrary to many “objective” theories of knowledge, perhaps life’s particular, everyday experiences are integral to *how* and *what* people know. The wisest people might just be those who, through rich practices, cultivate virtues and a goods-focused *habitus*.

6. Bibliography

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7. Endnotes

1 Interestingly, Aristotle claims that "master workers" are wiser than manual laborers because they have reasons and explanations for things. Being a skilled worker (e.g., carpenter) takes practice, yet this practice does not exclude reason. Indeed, there is a rationality to practices, which will be a central point in this paper. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope (New York: University of Michigan Press, 1952), 5.

2 An editor of this paper commented that there may be a disconnect between Nozick's epistemic interests and MacIntyre's ethical interests. The point made by the editor is that Nozick and MacIntyre's philosophical theories are developed in separate disciplines, which do not integrate well. However, the argument of this paper is that, while both philosophers write primarily about different disciplines within philosophy, combining complementary themes from their philosophies mutually strengthens both of their theories. Each of their positions can attain a greater reach and more successful comprehensiveness when synthesized together into one working theory. In recent years, Linda Zagzebski has done similar philosophical work by developing *virtue epistemology*.

3 Holding that neutral argumentation is an Enlightenment myth, this paper argues from the Christian community, using theological developments when helpful. Furthermore, this analysis of truth-tracking and practices is created *for* and *from* the Church, though it is profitable for everyone. Alvin Plantinga has advocated for such a stance for Christian philosophers, and this paper follows his trajectory. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* (vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1984): 253–71. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19841317>), 268-270.

4 Robert Nozick, "Knowledge and Scepticism," in *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology*, eds. Fred Dretske and Sven Bernecker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 355.

5 *Ibid.*, 354.

6 Nozick's criteria for knowledge is not the primary focus of this paper, but they nonetheless are important for context. Conditions (3) and (4) substitute justification in the classical "JTB" criteria for knowledge. He writes, "S knows, via method (or way of believing) *M*, that *p*:"

- (1) *p* is true.
- (2) *S* believes, via method or way of coming to believe *M*, that *p*.
- (3) If *p* weren't true and *S* were to use *M* to arrive at a belief whether (or not) *p*, then *S* wouldn't believe, via *M*, that *p*.
- (4) If *p* were true and *S* were to use *M* to arrive at a belief whether (or not) *p*, then *S* would believe, via *M*, that *p*."

The significant point for the current discussion is the condition, "via *M*," in (2), (3), and (4). Ibid., 354.

7 Ibid., 354.

8 Ibid., 364.

9 Nozick, "Knowledge and Scepticism," 362.

10 Nozick's central claim is that, since condition (3) is not closed under logical implication, knowledge (specifically the negative type) does not function according to the closure principle. Ibid., 362-363.

11 These are not the exhaustive claims that MacIntyre makes about practices. Other things, such as narrative also are integral for practices.

12 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 187.

13 Ibid., 188-189.

14 Ibid., 188.

15 Thus, MacIntyre's definition of virtue: "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods." Ibid., 191.

16 MacIntyrian scholar Brad Kallenberg writes, "[P]ractices have standards of excellence without which internal goods cannot be fully achieved. The joy of chess is in having played well. And what counts for excellence has been determined by the historical community of practitioners." Brad Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," in *All Things Hold Together in Christ: A Conversation on Faith, Science, and Virtue*, eds. James K. A. Smith and Michael L. Gulker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 86.

17 Certainly, some traditions are "truer" than others, in a sense. This issue of relativism will briefly be addressed later. Ibid., 89-91.

18 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

19 MacIntyre argues that four main traditions are being extended today: (1) the Aristotelian tradition, (2) the Augustinian tradition, (3) the Enlightenment tradition, and (4) liberalism. Alasdair MacIntyre "The Rationality of Traditions," in *All Things Hold Together in Christ: A Conversation on Faith, Science, and Virtue*, eds. James K. A. Smith and Michael L. Gulker, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 191.

20 Ibid., 192.

21 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 2006), 6.

22 Ibid., 119-120.

23 James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 83.

24 Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*, (Princeton University Press, 2013. Princeton Scholarship Online, 2017. doi:10.23943/princeton/9780691158617.001.0001), 2.

25 Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 69.

26 Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?: Jesus, Revelation & Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 107-119.

27 James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 24-25, 29-37

28 So much more can be said about this possible critique of tracking truth throughout traditions. This reply is not fully adequate, but hopefully supplies a trajectory for further consideration.