Self-trust and the natural desire for truth

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Abstract

In this paper I begin with the natural desire for truth and the natural belief that the desire is satisfiable. We must trust this desire to lead a normal life. I then argue that that requires us to have basic trust in our epistemic faculties and emotion dispositions, and consistency requires us to have the same basic trust in others. Epistemic egoism is as indefensible as ethical egoism. Furthermore, trust in the natural desire for truth inexorably pushes us to trust other natural desires, including the natural desire for understanding and the natural desire for connectedness with the universe. We have the same grounds for trusting those desires as we have for trusting the desire for truth.

1. Introduction: the need for epistemic self-trust

Human beings have many natural desires. I think everyone agrees with that as long as nothing ontologically loaded is intended by the word natural. I do not need anything ontologically loaded to make my point. I just mean that there are desires that virtually all human beings have. Some of the more interesting ones are a desire for truth, a desire for understanding, a desire for meaning, a desire to form bonds and communities with other persons, and a desire to be connected to the world around us, including the non-human world. I will return to the desire for connectedness, but I want to focus first on the desire for truth because I think it enjoys a certain primacy in the map of our desires, and if the desire is reasonable, there are some interesting consequences.

When I say there is a natural desire for truth, I do not mean to use the word truth in a loaded or controversial way either. I just mean there is a natural desire to figure out the way the world is. I assume that virtually everyone has that desire and virtually everyone thinks that that desire is satisfiable. So in addition to the natural desire for truth, there is a natural belief that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable.

Virtually everyone has that belief, and that includes the skeptic. The radical skeptic argues that the belief is not supported by reason and other natural faculties, but rarely, if ever, does anyone give up the belief. Furthermore, it is clear that the skeptic has the desire for truth since skepticism loses its point if there is no such desire.

I am not going to discuss skepticism in this paper, with the exception of one kind of skeptic who simply calls our attention to something that seems to me to be plainly true: we have no non-circular support for the natural belief that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable. That is, we have no way of telling that our natural faculties directed at truth reliably succeed at getting the truth since we must use our faculties in order to determine their reliability. Another way to make the same point is that we have no external standpoint from which to check the reliability of our faculties taken as a whole. But we do have internal checks on our faculties. We can check a perception by another perception, by reason, and the testimony of others; we can check our memory by perception, other memories, reason, and testimony; we check testimony by perception, memory, and reason. Some faculties may be more basic than others. For instance, perception is arguably more basic than memory because we use perception to check memory, but not vice versa, but I do not insist on that point. In any case, there are no non-circular guarantees that our faculties as a whole reliably get us to the truth.[1]

A belief is a deliverance of a set of faculties. It is the output of at least one, and often more than one faculty. We check our beliefs the same way we check the deliverance of our sensory faculties and our memory — we check them against the deliverances of other faculties, or the same faculty on another occasion. Typically, I check a belief against my other beliefs in combination with the use of my faculties. I always have to assume the reliability of at least one faculty in confirming any of my beliefs. This is even true if a strong form of foundationalism is correct. If there are foundational beliefs, those beliefs do not need to be checked by other beliefs, since that is what it means to be a foundational belief. Nevertheless, I need to trust the faculty producing the foundational belief. Even Descartes famous Cogito argument relies upon the trustworthiness of the faculty that gives him the insight that I think requires I am in the way he describes. Since a belief is a deliverance of a faculty, I am always depending upon the reliability of the faculty delivering the belief if I trust the veridicality of the belief, and I am always using at least one faculty in checking the deliverance of any of my faculties, or in checking the reliability of any of my faculties over a period of time.

It might seem that since there is no non-circular guarantee of the reliability of my faculties and the veridicality of particular outputs, I have no reason to trust my faculties at all, but

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[1]I think that in fact there are no non-circular guarantees that any of our basic faculties is reliable (a point argued by Alston in [1]). However, I do not need the stronger claim in what I am arguing in this paper. So I do not insist that we cannot demonstrate the reliability of sense perception without using sense perception, that we cannot demonstrate the reliability of reason without using reason, and so on. It is sufficient for my argument that there is no non-circular way to test the reliability of our faculties taken as a whole.

a circular test is better than no test. After all, many beliefs and other deliverances of our faculties fail the test. We would be much worse off if our beliefs, perceptual states, and memories routinely failed to be confirmed by our other beliefs, perceptions and memories. Still, the fact that the deliverances of our faculties, including beliefs, generally pass the test does not demonstrate the reliability of our faculties. This should not disturb us since we would have to be very confused to expect a non-circular test of reliability. That there is no such test follows immediately from the assumption that the reliability at issue is a relation between our faculties as a whole and something about which we can be mistaken. It is usual to call that a world outside our minds, but the point does not hinge on the idea that the world is external to our minds.[2]

Once I see the lack of non-circular support for the natural belief that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable, I can retain that belief only if I have self-trust in those faculties that I think lead me to the truth. What I mean by self-trust is a state in which I have the same confidence I would have if I had non-circular support for the belief that my faculties are reliable as a whole. I lack such support, but I act as if I had it, and I have the same attitude towards my faculties that I would have if I had it. So self-trust has two parts: (a) I assume the general reliability of my faculties, and (b) I actually rely upon my faculties. Notice that (a) is not sufficient for (b). I can think that someone or something is reliable without actually relying upon it. That can happen if there is something else that I also believe is reliable that I can rely upon instead, and it can happen if I do not need to rely upon anything to form a belief because I can forego having the belief. But assuming that I cannot forego having the natural belief that my natural desire for truth is satisfiable, and given that there is nothing I can rely upon instead of my faculties taken as a whole, I need to rely upon my faculties taken as a whole. Given (a), I have a presumption in favor of the veridicality of the deliverances of my faculties until shown otherwise by the further use of my own faculties. Given (b), my attitude is to trust them until they are proven untrustworthy.[3]

Self-trust, then, is an attitude opposed to doubt. I face the world with the assumption that truth is within my grasp, and I assume that I know what the faculties are that get me to the truth, at least some of them, and I rely upon these faculties in forming, maintaining, and altering my beliefs. They include my perceptual faculties, my memory, and my cognitive faculties.

Somewhat more controversially, I think they include emotions. Clearly, we have reason to mistrust emotions on many occasions. We have evidence from brain research that the neural pathways leading to the experience of some basic emotions such as fear operate rapidly, in

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[2]Of course, some of our beliefs are about our own minds, but we can be mistaken about most of these beliefs also, and we have no way to check their veridicality in a non-circular way.

[3]Assuming that something is trustworthy includes more than assuming it is reliable, and trusting something includes more than relying upon it. But for the purposes of this paper I will use trustworthy and reliable interchangeably.

parallel with the slower pathways leading to the cerebral cortex, which explains why we can experience an emotion before we have had time to fully appraise the situation that gives rise to the emotion and the appropriateness of the emotional response. By and large, our emotions tend to be exaggerated responses to situations. They are exaggerated both in their range of generality (we fear the fearsome, but we also fear plenty of things that arent fearsome), and they are exaggerated in their intensity, so many people find them untrustworthy. But that inference would be a mistake. An exaggerated response can still be an exaggeration of the right response. In fact, we generally do not call something exaggerated unless it is too much of the right thing. We get too indignant, too angry, too fearful, too enthralled when in love, and so on, but it does not follow from that that emotions are generally inappropriate. If we interpret emotions as part of a network of faculties that includes the cognitive appraisal of the emotion stimulus as well as the immediate feeling generated by alternate neural pathways, then I think we have no reason to think that they are generally untrustworthy.

In fact, we need to trust emotions for at least two reasons: (1) Our grounds for trusting emotions are the same as the grounds for trusting such faculties as perception, memory, and reason. There are no non-circular grounds for believing they are reliable, but there is internal evidence that emotions that survive reflection are reliable;[4] (2) Trusting our beliefs often requires trusting our emotions because many beliefs are grounded in emotions, particularly, those beliefs that lead to action. I cannot live a normal life without trusting my emotions of love, fear, admiration, and indignation. There are probably other emotions I have learned not to trust very much (e.g., anger), and some I do not trust at all (e.g., jealousy), but we should not be misled by the untrustworthiness of some emotions to think that emotions are generally untrustworthy. However, I will not say anything more in defense of my claim that epistemic self-trust must include trust in many emotions. Most of what I say in this paper can be accepted without this claim, but some of my arguments in the next two sections are strengthened if the claim is accepted.

2. The incoherence of epistemic egoism

So far I have argued that trust in the natural desire for truth requires each of us to trust her own epistemic faculties, including faculties of perception, memory, reason, and some of the emotions. There is no non-circular evidence that these faculties are reliable as a whole, but to live a normal life we must rely upon these faculties as we would if we did have such evidence; that is, we must trust them. Next I want to argue that we are committed on grounds of consistency to epistemic trust in others, and our trust in others is an important internal test for the trustworthiness of our natural desires. I will begin by distinguishing three forms of

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[4]The evidence is not as consistent and compelling as the internal evidence that we can trust certain categories of perception, memory, and reasoning. In my opinion, this makes the study of the epistemic significance of emotions important. We need ways of sorting out the trustworthy emotions from the untrustworthy ones. But our difficulties in doing this should not lead us to conclude that emotions are in general epistemically untrustworthy.

epistemic egoism and will argue that all three forms are incoherent.

What I will call extreme epistemic egoism is the view that the fact that someone else believes p never gives me a reason to believe p myself. The extreme epistemic egoist treats the belief of another person as relevant to what she believes herself only if the truth of what he believes can be demonstrated to her, given her previous beliefs and the use of her own faculties, but she will never believe anything on his testimony. There is an interesting parallel between the extreme epistemic egoist and the extreme ethical egoist. The latter maintains that the fact that something is in the interests of another person is never a reason to act in those interests. She will act for the sake of the interests of others only if it can be demonstrated to her that doing so serves her own interests.[5] The extreme epistemic egoist puts no epistemic value on the beliefs of others as such. The fact that another person has a belief does not count in her considerations about what to believe. Similarly, the extreme ethical egoist puts no practical or moral value on the interests of others as such. The fact that another person has an interest does not count in her own desires or practical considerations. Extreme ethical egoism is very implausible and it is hard to find a philosopher who endorses it, but many philosophers have endorsed extreme epistemic egoism.

A less extreme version of epistemic egoism is what I will call strong epistemic egoism. The strong epistemic egoist maintains that she has no obligation to count what another person believes as relevant to her own beliefs unless she sees that given what she believes about him, he is likely to serve her desire for the truth, that is, she sees that he is reliable. Similarly, according to the strong ethical egoist, there is no obligation to count the interests of another as relevant to her practical considerations. She might count his interests as relevant if she sees that there is a reliable connection between serving his interests and serving her own interests, but she acknowledges no obligation to do so. The strong ethical egoist maintains that she has no unchosen obligation to desire what another person desires on the grounds that he desires it, and the strong epistemic egoist maintains that she has no unchosen obligation to believe what another person believes on the grounds that he believes it. The strong epistemic egoist will believe on testimony only when she believes the testifier is reliable based on the use of her own faculties and reference to her own previous beliefs. In the same way, the strong ethical egoist will desire what someone else desires only when she sees that doing so is instrumentally connected to satisfying her own desires.

There is another sort of epistemic egoist that is interesting. What I call the weak epistemic egoist is someone who maintains that when she has evidence that someone elses beliefs reliably serve her desire for the truth in some domain, she is not only rationally permitted, she is rationally required to take his beliefs into account in forming her own beliefs. Likewise, the weaker sort of ethical egoist is a person who maintains that she is rationally required to take

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[5]By interests I mean to include desires, aims, values, and things we care about. I do not mean to limit interests to what is good for one.

into account the interests of another in those cases in which she has evidence that serving his interests serves her own interests. Otherwise, she has no obligation to care about anyone elses interests.

Although strong and weak ethical egoism are not as implausible as extreme ethical egoism, they are still implausible theories. In contrast, epistemic egoism is appealing to many philosophers because it seems to express the ideal of epistemic autonomy.[6] For example, Elizabeth Fricker argues that the ideal would be the position I have called extreme epistemic egoism, but given human limitations, we cannot have a healthy amount of knowledge without relying upon others, and so Fricker endorses a position that I interpret as a form of weak epistemic egoism.[7]

Richard Foley argues that epistemic egoism is incoherent, given the need for epistemic self-trust [5].[8] He argues that since I acquired most of my beliefs from other people, I would not be reliable unless they are. That applies to people who preceded me historically, but it also applies to many of my contemporaries since they acquired most of their beliefs from the same sources from which I acquired mine. So my reliability depends upon the reliability of many other people. Since I must place epistemic trust in myself, Foley argues, I must also trust a multitude of others.

Foley might be right that if I am reliable, many other people must be reliable also, but the reason cannot be primarily the fact that I got my beliefs from them. Even if I acquired 90% of my beliefs from a certain set of other people, A, and I am reliable, it does not follow that any particular member of A is reliable, nor even that A is reliable as a whole unless most of their beliefs are passed on to me (It is possible that they passed on beliefs a higher percentage of which are true than the percentage of beliefs they have as a whole). If my reliability depends upon theirs, then, I doubt that it is because I acquired a lot of beliefs from them.

But there is another reason why my reliability depends upon theirs. As Foley points out, other people have the same faculties I have and I learn that by using my faculties. The use of my faculties whose reliability I assume shows me that those faculties are possessed by others, and hence, if I am consistent, I must assume the reliability of others who share my faculties. I have no reason to assume that I am more reliable as a whole than other people. If I am consistent and I assume my own general trustworthiness, I must assume their general

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[6]I argue against epistemic autonomy if understood as a form of epistemic egoism in "Ethical and Epistemic Egoism and the Ideal of Autonomy" [2], and in [3], Chapter 3.

[7]Elizabeth Fricker defends a Testimony Deferential Principle paraphrased as follows: a hearer, H, properly accepts that P on the basis of trust in a speaker, Ss testimony that P if and only if S speaks sincerely, and S is epistemically well enough placed with respect to P to be in a position to know that P, and S is better epistemically placed with respect to P than H, and there is no equally well-qualified contrary testimony regarding P, and H recognizes all these things to be so [4].

[8]What I call "extreme epistemic egoism Foley calls epistemic egotism. What I call strong epistemic egoism Foley calls epistemic egoism. Foley does not distinguish a weaker form of epistemic egoism from a stronger form.

trustworthiness as well.[9]

I claimed above that there are two aspects to self-trust: I assume that I am reliable, and I rely upon myself. If we apply these two aspects to trust in others, we can say that trusting S includes two features: (a) I assume that S is reliable or trustworthy, and (b) I actually trust S; that is, I rely upon S. I also observed above that one can consistently do (a) but not (b). I might think that S is as trustworthy as R, but rely upon R and not S. There is no obvious irrationality in doing that since I have no obligation as a rational being to rely upon every trustworthy being whose trustworthiness I assume. I assume I am reliable and I rely upon myself because I have no choice but to do so if I retain the natural belief that my natural desire for truth is attainable, so I both assume my reliability and rely upon myself in forming my beliefs. If I am consistent, I must assume the reliability of others, but I have a choice about whether to rely upon them. That puts me in the position of choosing egoism or non-egoism. So far, then, we do not have an argument that epistemic egoism in any form we have considered is inconsistent.

Notice, however, that since the consistent epistemic egoist must assume the general reliability of others as well as herself, if she relies upon her own faculties and not those of others whose reliability she assumes, she must rely upon her own faculties just because they are hers, and she must be choosing not to rely upon the faculties of others just because they are theirs. That is, she chooses not to rely upon the faculties of others even though she must assume that they are reliable means to getting the truth. She thereby denies herself a vast network of the truth-producing faculties of others. She must, then, value her own faculties more than the truth. That makes her an ethical egoist in the realm of the intellect. The epistemic egoist we are considering is therefore consistent, but only at the price of ethical egoism, a very implausible position.

Suppose, however, that the epistemic egoist does care about the truth, and does not care about her own faculties more than the truth. I think, in fact, that the most plausible interpretation of the dispute between the epistemic egoist and the non-egoist is that it is a dispute between people who care about the truth and adopt different strategies for getting it. But with this assumption, I think it can be shown that epistemic egoism is inconsistent.

The extreme epistemic egoist trusts only her own powers and previous beliefs as a means to getting further true beliefs and knowledge. However, if the extreme egoist lives in a universe similar to our own, the use of her own powers will show her that there are other people who are trustworthy means for giving her the truth. She finds out that other people are reliable

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[9]Foley not only rejects epistemic egoism, but goes farther and endorses what he calls "epistemic universalism". A weak form of universalism would be the position that the mere fact that someone has a belief p always counts as a reason in favor of believing p. I interpret Foley as endorsing a stronger version of universalism according to which the fact that someone else believes p gives me a sufficient reason to believe p myself unless and until it is defeated by evidence about either the content of the belief or the believer.

in the same way she finds out that the grass will grow — by perception and induction. It takes a further use of her powers to infer that a particular belief of a particular other person is probably true, but there is no difference in principle between that inference and many other inferences she makes routinely and routinely trusts as an extreme egoist. So by using her own powers she sees that she is permitted to trust the powers and beliefs of many other people. Trust in her own powers requires her to weaken her extreme egoism and to become a strong epistemic egoist.

However, if her powers tell her she is permitted to trust another, then if she chooses not to trust him, she needs a reason not to trust him based on her own powers and beliefs. That might happen in some cases. Perhaps the beliefs of trustworthy others conflict with her own beliefs, or maybe the exercise of her faculties gives her conflicting verdicts on the trustworthiness of another. But again, if she is living in a universe anything like our own, there will be many cases in which there is no such conflict. By using her own powers and relying on her own previous beliefs, she will see that certain other people are trustworthy sources of truth on some occasion, and there is no reason not to trust them if she trusts herself. But if there is no reason not to trust them, then by the use of her own powers, she sees that she ought to trust them. She is then required by a consistent trust in her own faculties to become a weak epistemic egoist.

But the demands of consistent trust in herself require her to give up even weak epistemic egoism. Since the weak egoist cares about truth, she commits herself to being a conscientious believer, one whose epistemic behavior is governed by caring for the truth, and it is rational for her to trust herself when she is conscientious. She also has evidence that she gets the truth when she is conscientious, but like everybody else, she must trust herself in advance of the evidence since she must trust herself in order to collect and evaluate the evidence. So the rational epistemic egoist trusts herself when she is conscientious in attempting to get the truth, and this trust is not based on evidence of her trustworthiness.

But if the epistemic egoist is rational, she is committed to trusting others when they are conscientious, when they exhibit the behaviors she trusts in herself. Trusting herself commits her to trusting others when they are in the same position she is in; that is, when they are in similar circumstances, have similar powers and abilities, and act in as epistemically conscientious a way as she acts when she trusts herself. If she is consistent, she must trust them as much as herself, other things being equal, so she is committed to the requirements of weak epistemic egoism, but she must go beyond those requirements since she has no rational basis upon which to trust herself more than those she perceives to be epistemically equally well-placed. The only other option is to retrench in extreme ethical egoism. Since I am assuming she does not want to do that, it follows that she is rationally required to reject strong and weak epistemic egoism.

Trust in ones emotions gives us the same result. I claimed in the previous section that self-trust includes trust in the appropriateness of many of my emotions. One emotion the general appropriateness of which I must trust is the emotion of admiration. If I admire the way another person behaves epistemically as much as I admire my own epistemic processes in some cases, then I commit myself to the position that her epistemic faculties are as admirable as my own in those cases, and so I commit myself to trusting her faculties as much as my own. Sometimes trusting my emotion of admiration will lead me to trusting someones elses faculties more than my own with respect to certain beliefs. In such cases I do not always have evidence that she is more reliable than I am. I might trust her more than myself because I admire her epistemically more than myself with respect to the use of certain faculties on those occasions, and I trust my emotion of admiration.

We see, then, that the natural belief that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable commits us to epistemic self-trust, and epistemic self-trust commits us to epistemic trust in many other people. Epistemic egoism in any of the three forms I identified is an incoherent position. My general attitude towards the faculties of others should be the same as my general attitude towards my own faculties. I assume the reliability of both. Whatever reason I have for trusting one of my beliefs is equally a reason for trusting the belief of someone else, other things being equal – equal conscientiousness, admirability, and so on. In this way I can trust some people more than myself with respect to a given belief, some less than myself, and some more than others. I might have evidence that some are more reliable than others, of course, but I might also admire the epistemically admirable way some people form their beliefs more than others, and, as Ive said, the admirable is not determined by evidence of reliability.

There are a number of intriguing consequences of the commitment to trust in others. The fact that someone else whose faculties are relevantly similar to mine has a given belief gives me some reason to believe it myself, assuming that I trust the respects in which we are similar, and the reason is strengthened when there are large numbers of people who have a certain belief independently. If a million people believe the same thing because they all acquired the belief from the same person, I may have no more reason to trust the belief of a million than the belief of one. But if very large numbers of people, many of whom are unrelated to each other, believe the same thing, I am committed to trust their belief more than the belief of one or a few. Roughly, I think I should trust large numbers of people who have a certain belief more than one, other things being equal. This supports the traditional consensus gentium argument for the existence of God that we find in Cicero [6]. The fact that so many people all over the world at all times have believed in a deity gives me a reason to believe in a deity. But again, my trust in them can be defeated by other things I trust more than I trust those aspects of myself that I share with them. Even more significant for me are beliefs that are widely held among people I trust because I epistemically admire them and trust my admiration. Religious beliefs widely held among people I admire are more epistemically significant for me than widely held beliefs among people who share with me

only general human faculties.

It follows from my position that the problem of epistemic disagreement is not fundamentally a conflict between self-trust and trust in others, but is a problem that arises within self-trust, given that trust in others is a commitment of self-trust. If people I epistemically admire disagree with me, that is a threat to the reasonableness of my own belief, other things being equal (which, of course, they often are not). And even though the problem is lessened when there are others whom I admire just as much who agree with me, the problem is not thereby resolved.

Epistemic trust in others puts other people in the circle of internal checks on my faculties. My trust in myself on particular occasions is subject to testing by my trust in others. The fact that the use of my faculties tells me that others whom I trust, trust me, gives me further reason to trust myself in those respects or on those occasions. If I observe that not many other people whom I trust are epistemic egoists, that confirms me in my trust that epistemic egoism should be rejected. I have reason to trust what other people whom I trust, trust, and if other people trust their desire for truth, that gives me further reason to trust my own desire for truth. At the beginning of this paper I suggested that the desire for truth is natural in the sense that almost everybody has that desire, and I suggested that almost everybody has the belief that the desire is satisfiable. If the use of my faculties suggests that almost everybody has the desire for truth and the belief that the desire is satisfiable, that confirms my trust in the belief. To trust the belief that the natural desire for truth can be satisfied is to treat it as veridical and to rely upon it in my deliberations and in the formation of further beliefs.

If I epistemically trust what is epistemically trusted by those whom I trust, that confirms what I already trust naturally. There are other natural desires besides the desire for truth, but it is trust in the desire for truth that leads me to place epistemic trust in other people and what they trust. The desire for truth is a primary desire. It leads not only to trust in emotions and to trust in the epistemic faculties of other people, but it leads to trust in other natural desires. In the next section I will turn to two other natural desires. One of these desires is epistemic, but the other is partly non-epistemic.

3. The natural desire for understanding and the natural desire for connectedness

The argument I gave in the previous section arises out of a basic and probably inescapable form of self-trust – trust that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable. That desire leads us under pain of inconsistency to trust many other people. Trust in the natural desire for truth requires me to trust my own faculties, and that requires me to trust the faculties of other persons, as well as their emotions and beliefs when the latter arise from features of those

persons that I trust in myself. In this section we will look at two other natural desires – the natural desire for understanding, which is closely related to the natural desire for truth, and the natural desire for connectedness, which is related to the natural desire for understanding.

At the beginning of this paper I loosely characterized the desire for truth as the desire to figure out the way the world is. Attempting to figure out the world typically results in beliefs about the world, and if the desire for truth is successful, those beliefs are true, but arguably there is more than one state that is the successful result of attempting to figure out the way the world is. Understanding is a form of figuring things out. Unfortunately, understanding is woefully neglected in contemporary philosophical discourse and it is not at all clear what understanding is. There are probably a number of different kinds of understanding, and they may not all fit under one general account, but there is one type that I find interesting because it may not be reducible to believing (or knowing) a set of true propositions. This is the state to which we refer when we speak of understanding the layout of a city by looking at a map, or understanding a character in a novel, or understanding a work of art or music. We also speak of understanding academic fields such as astronomy and human practices such as auto mechanics. These forms of understanding involve grasping patterns in a larger structure, and seeing the relation of parts to other parts and the relation of parts to a whole. The relations grasped can be spatial, such as the relative location of sites in a city, and they can be temporal, as in a musical composition. They can be causal, and they can be intentional. Sometimes understanding involves the interpretation of a network of symbols. Often understanding is what we desire when we ask the question Why? — Why did she act the way she did? Why is the temperature rising? Why did the iconographer use the color red? Why should I turn right at the corner? The desire to answer questions of this form, the desire to grasp spatial, temporal, causal, intentional, and symbolic relations, and the desire to master a field of human practice are forms of the desire to figure things out.

It is common for philosophers to think of truth as a property of propositions, but since I wish to leave open the possibility that the object of understanding is not a proposition, I do not claim that understanding is a form of grasping the truth. Even so, I take it that the natural desire for understanding is closely related to the desire for truth whether or not the former is a species of the latter. Both are forms of the desire to figure out the way the world is.

An important feature of the world that we want to understand is consciousness. What is consciousness and how is it related to the part of the world that is not conscious? We also want to understand value. What is good and evil and how are they related to the non-evaluative aspects of the world? Ultimately, we want a view of the entire world that explains value as well as descriptive features of the world, that explains consciousness, and that explains purposes. We want understanding of the whole world, not just certain of its parts. I take it that the desire is natural. Perhaps it is not as universal as the desire for truth, but it is widespread and probably can be found in every culture in all periods of history. Should we

trust that the desire is satisfiable?

Notice that we have the same grounds for trusting the natural desire for understanding as the natural desire for truth. In neither case do we have grounds external to the use of our faculties that demonstrates the trustworthiness of the desire, and there can be skepticism about understanding as well as about truth, but we do assume that the desire is satisfiable, and we have internal checks on the deliverances of our faculties that putatively give us understanding or truth. Beliefs, emotions, and later instances of putative understanding are checks on previous instances of putative understanding. Trust in others is a check also. If trust in myself requires me to trust others, as I argued in the last section, then I have reason to trust desires that people whom I trust, trust. People whom I trust trust the desire for understanding. That gives me internal confirmation of trust in the desire for understanding as well as the desire for truth.

A desire related to the natural desire for understanding is the natural desire for connectedness, by which I mean the desire to understand the world in a way that gives me a role in it, not simply to be a spectator of it. I interpret this desire as a combination of the natural desire to understand the universe as a whole and the natural desire to be connected to that world. A detached understanding is not sufficient to satisfy this desire, nor is it sufficient to be connected to the world. I think of this desire as the desire to understand the universe in a way that shows that I am connected to it. Further, not just any old connection will do. If I am nothing more than a heap of organic material that some day will decompose and form the material for future plant life, clearly there is a sense in which I am connected to the world around me. But that is not the desire I mean, and it is not the desire that has directed most of the philosophies of the world until recently. We want to think that each of us is part of something bigger than ourselves and more important than any one of us individually.[10] The philosophical urge has always arisen out of this desire as well as the desire for truth. In fact, satisfaction of the desire for connectedness was generally thought to be a constraint on what would count as satisfaction of the desire for truth. That has changed, as I mentioned, but I think that if I am right that self-trust commits us to trust in the desires that people we trust, trust, then to the extent that we trust most of the philosophers in the history of philosophy, both in the West and in the East, we should trust the natural desire for connectedness as well as the natural desire for truth.

Thomas Nagel calls the desire for connectedness with the universe an expression of the religious temperament. Although he is an atheist, he has written a stunningly forthright and astute account of what makes atheistic naturalism so unsatisfying. For Nagel, religion is out, but he observes that secular philosophy is having a hard time finding something to

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[10]I am quite willing to say that each individual human person has infinite value, and so it may be misleading to say that each of us is connected to something more important than any one of us, but that does not falsify my main point because then it is quite obvious that each of us has a role to play in the universe as a whole, a role that assigns us supreme value.

put in its place. Religion plays a certain role in the inner life that needs to be filled by something. We want a view of the universe that is intelligible, but we also want it to be satisfying in some deeper sense. What that deeper sense is may be difficult to specify, but it requires understanding the universe in a way that makes the self more than a spectator. The way Nagel puts it is this: [H]aving, amazingly, burst into existence, one is a representative of existence itself – of the whole of it – not just because one is part of it but because it is present to ones consciousness. In each of us, the universe has come to consciousness, and therefore our existence is not merely our own [7].

According to what Nagel calls hardheaded atheism, human life and consequently, ones own life, is more or less an accidental consequence of physics, so hardheaded atheism simply dismisses the issue raised by the person with a religious temperament. Nagel then considers three ways to satisfy the religious yearning while maintaining atheism.

One is Humanism, the idea that the gap left by the loss of religion is filled by ourselves as a species or as a community. Humanism takes us outside of ourselves, but not very far outside. Humanism does not really give us a way of incorporating our conception of the universe as a whole into our lives. Its cosmic ambitions are very limited and Nagel calls it too feeble an answer.

The second option is existentialist defiance, according to which the universe is pointless, but we find meaning in the very refusal to accept that. This answer has greater cosmic scope than Humanism and Nagel considers it a viable option. The type of existentialism Nagel takes seriously is not Sartre in Existentialism is a Humanism, but Camus in "The Myth of Sisyphus". It consists in making a virtue of the will to go on in spite of the complete indifference of the cosmos. Not to be defeated by pointlessness is what gives our lives their point. Nagel finds this alternative a backup position. He favors it over hardheaded atheism, but it is not his preferred view.

Nagels preference is for his third option, non-reductive, teleological naturalism. According to this view, nothing exists but the natural world, but biology does not reduce to physics, consciousness does not reduce to physical processes, value does not reduce to descriptions, and there are irreducible principles of organization in the world that govern temporally extended development, including evolutionary processes, that are not merely mechanistic, but which are not mentally caused. They are neither accidental nor caused by a divine being. According to the teleological naturalist, we are part of something larger nature itself. Each of us, on Nagels view, is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up. It was originally a biological evolutionary process, and in our species it has become a collective cultural process as well. It will continue, and, seen from a larger perspective, ones own life is a small piece of this extended expansion of organization and consciousness. Nagel prefers teleological naturalism because he thinks it satisfies the natural desire for connectedness and

purpose as well as the desire for truth.

I do not know if Nagels hypothesis satisfies either of these desires, but I mention Nagel because I am impressed with his trust in the natural desire for connectedness even though it complicates the satisfaction of the desire for truth. Nagel does not maintain that the atheist has better evidence for his world-view than the theist. Rather, he seems to believe that the way we understand the universe and our connection to it depends upon what question we are asking about it and what it is in us that produces the question. That seems to me to be correct. I would argue further that if the natural desire for connectedness and purpose is not satisfiable, why think that the natural desire for truth about the physical universe is satisfiable? Conversely, if we trust the natural desire for truth and think that the natural belief that that desire is satisfiable is a reasonable one, why not trust the natural desire for connectedness with the universe and think that the natural belief that that desire is satisfiable is a reasonable one also? On what basis could we dismiss the question that arises from the religious temperament, but not the questions to which scientific answers are appropriate?

I want it to be clear that I am not beginning with the premise that all natural desires are satisfiable. I do not know how we could begin with such a premise, although that has certainly been proposed many times, e.g., Aquinas in an argument for immortality (see [8], q.75, a.6, corpus), and C. S. Lewis in an argument for both theism and immortality (see [9], Book 3, Chapter 10). Perhaps there is a natural belief that all natural desires are satisfiable, and I could have begun with such a belief. But that is not what I am suggesting here. I am starting with the reasonableness of a particular natural belief we already have, the belief that the natural desire for truth is satisfiable, and I am moving from there to the claim that it is reasonable to believe that a certain other natural desire is satisfiable as well – the natural desire for connectedness to the universe. There are differences between these two natural desires, as there are between any two things, and I have not ruled out the possibility that the differences are sufficient to make the natural desire for connectedness less reasonable than the natural desire for truth. But if so, that must be established. There are connections between the desire for truth and the desire for understanding, and between the desire for understanding and the desire for connectedness. I am claiming that we have prima facie reason to trust the third if we trust the first, and we have even stronger reason to trust the third if we trust the second.

I have already mentioned that trust in natural desires is confirmed by the fact that they are trusted by people we trust. The natural desire for truth, the natural desire for understanding, and the natural desire for connectedness are trusted by people I trust. I would not suggest that everyone I trust trusts all three of these desires, but many of the people I admire the most do, including most of the major philosophers in history.

There are no doubt other natural desires that are trusted by people I trust, as well as

virtually everybody else. Everyone has a natural desire that we can loosely describe as the desire for good – the desire to be good, to honor good, and to create and promote good. I have mentioned several different relations that we can have towards goodness, reflecting the fact that there are many different categories of good, a difference which I will not try to disentangle in this paper. I mention the desire for good only to point out that there is a natural desire to be related to good in at least some of these ways. I think also that we all trust that desire. Trusting that desire is a condition for the motivation to perform many common human acts (as well as some uncommon ones). We trust the natural desire for good, the natural desire for truth, and the natural desire for connectedness, which is somewhere in between the desire for truth and the desire for good. If someone thinks there is something untrustworthy about the natural desire for connectedness but not these other natural desires, then I think that person has the burden of proof in showing why we should think so.

4. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that trust in the natural desire for truth inexorably pushes us towards trusting others and towards trusting other natural desires. Everything we trust is subject to internal checks from other things we trust. Trust in the natural desire for truth leads to epistemic self-trust, and the recognition of the reasonableness of epistemic self-trust commits us to recognition of the reasonableness of epistemic trust in others and trust in other natural desires, including the desires that are trusted by people we trust. It also leads to trust in certain emotions. We trust that what we admire upon reflection is admirable, what we fear upon reflection is fearsome, what we love is lovable, what we hope for is deserving of hope, and in any case, there is something worth loving and something worth hoping for, and something that can satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart.

The natural desire for truth may be primary in a stronger sense. Not only does trust in that desire lead to trust in other desires, but if the desire for truth is untrustworthy, we have no reason to trust any other desire. As Dante says in the Paradiso [10]:

> *Nothing can satiate, I now see, unless*
> *The True illumine it, the mind of men:*
> *Beyond that, no truth can enlarge its place.*
> *Therein it rests like wild beast in his den,*
> *Soon as it reaches it; and reach it may:*
> *Else every human longing were in vain.*

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